

The Homesteaders



KATE and VIRGIL D. BOYLES

+40 91023
120

Mayme Heibeler.



THE HOMESTEADERS

By the Same Authors

LANGFORD OF THE THREE
BARS. A Fighter of the Right
Sort. With pictures in color and
cover design by N. C. Wyeth.
Crown 8vo. *Second Edition.* \$1.50.

A. C. McCLURG & CO.
PUBLISHERS

THE HOMESTEADERS

BY

KATE AND VIRGIL D. BOYLES

AUTHORS OF "LANGFORD OF THE THREE BARS"

With Four Illustrations in Full Color by

MAYNARD DIXON



CHICAGO

A. C. McCLURG & CO.

1909

COPYRIGHT
A. C. McCLURG & CO.
1909

Published September 11, 1909

Entered at Stationers' Hall, London, England

All Rights Reserved

The Lakeside Press
R. R. DONNELLEY & SONS COMPANY
CHICAGO

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I JOSEPHINE CARROLL	11
II NEIGHBOR NUMBER TWO	31
III THE BEGINNING OF A QUARREL	47
IV ONJIJITKA	60
V A CHANCE ENCOUNTER AND A RESCUE	73
VI AT THE RANCH HOUSE OF THE SEVEN-UP	88
VII ONJIJITKA MAKES A DISCOVERY	98
VIII CARROLL CALLS ON HIS NEIGHBOR	112
IX UP THE MISSOURI	123
X THE CONTEST	138
XI THE BIG GULCH	163
XII HONOR AMONG THIEVES	181
XIII THE TRAGEDY AT THE HOMESTEAD	208
XIV THE NEXT MORNING	230
XV THE LONG CHASE	242
XVI ONJIJITKA'S LAMENT	251
XVII BURRINGTON JOINS THE CHASE	263
XVIII THE BROKEN KEY DESERTED	276
XIX HENRY CONFESSES	286
XX THE END OF THE LONG CHASE	306
XXI THE HOMESTEADER	328

ILLUSTRATIONS

FILE

"Standing thus, dumb, while twilight crept over all the land"	Frontispiece
"'How do you do?' answered the stranger, in a clear, sweet voice"	62
"Saddle and rider shot through the air"	154
"The young ranchman dealt death fairly and truly to the slayer of his friend"	326

THE HOMESTEADERS

CHAPTER I

JOSEPHINE CARROLL

FOR the first time since she had come to the Northwest country, Josephine Carroll felt lonely. It was a strange feeling, under the circumstances, and unexplainable. Jack was there — in that very room — with his idle hands clasped behind his head, his feet upon the window sill, his gaze upon the near hills, seeing visions. She had thought that when the old, close companionship, a year broken, should be renewed, she could never be lonely again. It was the day that made her restless, or the hills, perhaps. More practical than Jack, she saw in those huge, broken masses of gloomy, gumbo-stained hills, piled high up into the cloudy dampness, only an unaccountable freak of that age of unaccountabilities when the waters receded from the land; but more sensitive, she was the more depressed by their overshadowing nearness. And the

THE HOMESTEADERS

day — it was far too warm for February, and damp and close and still. There had been no snow for days, and yet the dead, winter-bunched grass on the steep slopes and in the wide valley of the river looked heavy and sodden because of the wetness in the air. Even the gaunt, bared branches of the small cottonwoods, and the rusty brown of the cedars that followed the course of the ice-bound river and merged into the forest of loftier elms and ancient, gigantic cottonwoods of LaDue's Island, contributed their just quota to the general gloom. The air was so still and light that the sound of each echoed blow of the axe in the hands of the island woodchopper came rhythmically to the ears of the homesteaders.

Josephine sighed, and then, to cover the sound of it, yawned slightly, and stooped to smooth the ruffled fur of the big gray wolfskin rug that lay on the floor by the fire. It was a strong hand that stroked the stiff bristles into submissive order, though finely formed and unaccustomed to many things that they now found to do. Josephine herself was strong with a fine strength that showed itself in supple, assured movement, and in the clear, steadfast eyes that had a trick of looking at one sometimes so calmly and un-

JOSEPHINE CARROLL

questioningly, and yet so straightforwardly, that the effect was strangely disconcerting if one's thought or motive were not altogether honest. They were brown with deeps in them, yet were not all of one color, but were made up of varying shades of soft browns that made them beautiful. Her hair was yellow — very bright hair it was, too, when the sun shone on it. She herself called it red, and she wore it piled high upon her head — a proud head, with lifted chin. The lifted chin gave one an erroneous impression of height which Josephine secretly coveted. She was not tall. On the contrary, she was really below the medium; but she looked tall because of the lifted chin and the high coils of shining hair. Jack could have told, had he so willed, something of her passion for height which was not a late and passing fancy, by any means, but dated back to the days of long ago, and had not been really overcome until one day in the Summer just past.

Down on a particular old country place in the South is a particular old orchard in which is a particular gnarled old apple tree, nearly dead now and with good reason. On her sixth birthday, Josephine Carroll had suddenly conceived the notion that she was an extremely important per-

THE HOMESTEADERS

sonage in point of age. This conception was quickly followed in a natural sequence of thought by a consuming desire to know just how much she lacked of being as tall as her mother, whom she ardently longed to be like. She had immediately confided this big longing to Jack, aged nine, who was always ready with a way to help her out of her childish difficulties. Oftentimes, these ways proved to be the ways of a dreamer and resulted unhappily; but Josephine always forgot such times promptly. Her faith in Jack was absolute. On this occasion, they were building a play-house for the new birthday doll under their own particular apple tree. Resourceful Jack had at once scudded to the house for hammer and nails and had then driven a ten-penny deep into the heart of the tree trunk just above the tangled yellow hair of the ambitious little maid. Darkly designing, they had then wheedled their mother into the orchard under promise to show her the new play-house. Smiling and unsuspecting, obeying an urgent entreaty, she stood straight against the tree just to see if she were not as tall as the crotch. She did not understand the childish ruse until she had unexpectedly torn her dainty summer gown on a nail where

JOSEPHINE CARROLL

no nail should have been and, glancing inquiringly at the children for explanation, had seen the tears brimming in the eyes of one and had heard the jeering, boyish crow of the other.

“Oh, me! But did n’t you think you was big just ’cause you had a birthday! I’ll have one Christmas and then I’ll show you what it is to be really big, sis. What a heap of growin’ you’ll have to do! You’ll prob’ly be as tall as mother ’bout when you’re forty and ready to die.”

It had been a great disappointment for the proud six-year-old.

“I’ll tell you what to do, Josephine,” the mother had said, consolingly. “Every birthday, you have Jack drive a new nail over your head and we’ll see how many nails it takes before you reach this one which I will drive in now and which means me.”

She had laughed merrily, the queenly young mother, as with awkward fingers she drove in the big nail; and it had proved an alluring game for the child until she was thirteen years old. Early on this anniversary of her natal day, she had stamped an impatient foot in chagrin at the discouraging space of tree trunk left between her last nail and that one away up there nearly to

THE HOMESTEADERS

the crotch, which meant her mother. There had been no one to see her outburst of temper but Jack, and Jack at sixteen was more loyal than he had been at nine; so she had announced calmly upon reëntering the house that she should never drive another nail — it was so very childish — she was almost grown now, and, “I think I have outgrown such babyish amusements, don’t you, mother?” she had asked sedately, and Jack had only smiled.

Josephine had kept her word faithfully until her twenty-fourth birthday. She knew then that there could never be a recurrence of the visits to the old apple tree and she drove her last nail, her eyes blinded with tears for her who had instituted the childish game to comfort a childish sorrow, and who had gone from her since her last birthday; and then she smiled through her tears to see how much of a lack there yet was — and she was twenty-four years old that day. She found a big stone that had served many different purposes in the old housekeeping days, and standing upon it, kissed the highest nail very tenderly before going back into the house to write to Jack that she would be ready to join him on his claim at the beginning of the New Year.

JOSEPHINE CARROLL

No, Josephine was not tall, although it may be that her longing after the unattainable nail had helped to give that little lift to her chin which was forever giving the impression of greater height than she possessed.

The wolfskin which she stroked and of which Jack was so boyishly proud, because it was the first big game he had brought down since coming West, was the only carpet the bare little room afforded, but there was a good flooring which gave the Southern boy's claim shanty an air of comfort and substantiality that many another lacked in those days of the early nineties. The brother, who had not told the real reason for Josephine's sudden aversion to a game of long ago, had builded for her the best that he could, fifteen miles from a railroad, with the river running between. The house was squarely and compactly built of logs and there were two rooms and an attic. He meant to stay and he wanted very much that Josephine should stay, too. For this, his old friends and neighbors in the South called him a visionary, while his new friends and neighbors of the West called him more or less good-naturedly a tenderfoot and a pilgrim. There were those, too, who designated him by even harsher names

THE HOMESTEADERS

than these, deeming it criminal incompetency to bring a gentlewoman to this land, bleak with Winter. But neither Jack nor Josephine cared a whit what anybody said or thought concerning this affair that they held to be entirely their own. Not only was Josephine determined to stay, but she had also filed on the quarter adjoining Jack's on the north and meant to live there when the time came.

The wind arose along in the afternoon of this traditionally warm day in February. It was a warm, fawning wind out of the southwest until it suddenly whipped around to the northwest, a signal for the experienced to look well to their woodboxes and coalbins and to gather their families in from herd and barn and country school. The wind increased in volume steadily, and presently it began to snow. Not until then did John Calhoun Carroll, late a gentleman of the Atlantic seaboard, now a homesteader in the wonderful hill region lying west of the Missouri River, turn his eyes, brown like Josephine's, from their dreamy contemplation of these same hills, reluctantly, and, stifling a yawn, arise to his feet.

"There is a storm coming, Jo," he said, carelessly. "I think I had better ride after the cattle

JOSEPHINE CARROLL

and get them safely in the corral before it gets any worse.”

“Had n’t you better let them shift for themselves to-night?” asked Josephine, a tiny line of concern wrinkling her forehead. “Look, Jack! It is snowing so hard that the hills are almost blotted out already.”

“All the more reason why I should be up and doing,” said Jack, cheerfully. “Let them be blotted from sight; just so the Broken Key be not blotted from existence.”

“Well, if you must —” said Josephine, reluctantly, “but I do hate to see you go. Here, tie up your throat, button your overcoat up tight, and be sure to hold your head down and do not swallow any snow wind,” she cautioned, solicitously.

Jack laughed. He had always laughed at Josephine’s solicitudes, even in the old days. But he liked them. He had always liked them; but he liked them more than ever after a year’s yearning through voluntary exile. The rude door slammed behind him violently, caught by a quick, resistless shock of wind that came nosing warningly down the valley of the great, bleak, frozen river. With a laugh of indifference, Jack

THE HOMESTEADERS

ran with the wind to the corral, saddled and bridled his own particular cow pony, flung himself into the saddle, bent his head and began forcing his way northward through the driving snow to the succor of fifty head of Broken Key cattle, winter-grazing beyond the big gulch three-quarters of a mile away.

Josephine, watching at the small, square window, saw her brother disappear into the white void of the storm to the north and then the chill in the room crept to her heart and remained there. It grew steadily colder. The fine, driving snow beat and swirled against the window, and, drifting in, lay unmelted upon the sill. Conscious at last of the increasing cold, she replenished the fire, stuffing huge sticks of driftwood into the stove till the fire roared and crackled and went rumbling up the chimney, lured to a mad revelry of abandoned spirits by the persistent call of the storm fiend. The renewed warmth did not heal Josephine's restlessness. She put on the tea kettle with some vague idea of an early supper, though night was yet far distant. When it was singing bravely away, making a gallant effort to outwit the pervading gloom, she sat down with her darning materials, but paused dismayed be-

JOSEPHINE CARROLL

fore the immensity of the yawning discrepancies in the heels of Jack's hose. Poor old Jack, there had been no one to mend for him all these many months; but it was far too gigantic a task for her to undertake now with that terrible wind pounding on her nerves. The work dropped from her idle fingers and fell to the floor.

When an hour had passed, she went to the window again, where a trembling seized her. What had become of the sheds and the corral and all the trees! Not even a dark, indistinct blur of them showed through the dead white pall that lay between—and Jack had not yet returned. She opened the door hurriedly and stepped out. She was immediately engulfed in a choking whirl of icy snow that blinded and strangled her, while a wild gust of wind driving down from the hills and sweeping around the corner of the house caught her unawares and forced her to her knees. Gasping, she crept back into the house, glad in her heart for the cosy strength of its stanchly constructed walls that scarcely shook in the grasp of the mad wind. Hitherto she had been vaguely uneasy because of Jack's long absence, but now she became seriously alarmed. She began to realize that this was no common storm.

THE HOMESTEADERS

When another half-hour had passed away and still Jack had not returned, the conviction stole coldly over her that her brave young pioneer brother, the last of his name, with whom and for whom she had so unhesitatingly chosen to cast in her lot in this big, lonesome Northwest country, was either lost or some serious accident had befallen him. Nothing else could have kept him so long away from her while this strange, terrifying storm was screaming outside. What could she do? Go in search of him? The heartbreaking uselessness of such a course, when she remembered how savagely and instantly she had been choked back when she but stepped outside the door, whitened her face with apprehension and brought hot tears of impotent rebellion to her eyes. Perhaps her island neighbor might help her. It was a comforting thought—this one that she was not altogether alone in this infinity of blank whiteness. The island was not really an island, after all, in winter time when the water was low. She should not have to cross any ice at all—if she could only find the way. She had never been there nor had she ever seen the woodchopper, but she knew where his log cabin was—one could see the light of it at night when the forest was bare,

JOSEPHINE CARROLL

—and she knew also the law of the hanging latch string in the plains country. More than all, she knew that she could no longer sit idle and sheltered while Jack battled for his very breath, maybe, out there in the swirl of the snow. Even if she died for it, she must do something. She had heard Jack say that Frank LaDue was an old-timer — surely then he knew the ways of such storms as this one and would know how to go about instituting a search for a missing man. If she could only find the way! Well, at least she could try to find it.

She went about her preparations very carefully. She had felt the icy touch of the storm once and it had not been a pleasant experience. She put on her riding leggings, overshoes, and heavy jacket, wrapped her head and throat well in a big shawl, stuffed the stove full again from the dwindling pile of driftwood, opened the door and stepped out. Instantly, her mouth and eyes were filled with the fine driving ice particles and she was forced to steady herself by holding desperately to the door knob while she tried to cough up the cold wind and snow that was choking her. Before making a fresh start, she let the shawl fall over her face and found breathing easier,

THE HOMESTEADERS

although now she must needs pick her way from memory and intuition northward along the river, then across the rough, dry bed of the slough, and again northward into the heart of the heavily timbered island, in the teeth of the wind almost all the way.

Many, many times she stumbled and fell, but always she picked herself up and fought on. Sometimes she put back the shawl from before her face in order not to lose her slight knowledge of location. Always she held her course close to the trees along the bank in order to keep the direction. She was soon very tired. She wondered if she might not lie down and rest for a minute. It would give her strength to press on. She fought this drowsy inclination desperately for a long time, but it would have conquered her presently had she not been all at once conscious of a slight surcease in the beat of the ice-impregnated air against her and wonderingly saw before her a dim dark outline showing but hauntingly through the heavy meshes of the curtain of the storm. When she realized that this must be the house she was seeking, she gave a little sob of relief and went stumblingly up to the door. It was opened almost instantly.

JOSEPHINE CARROLL

"Blamed if it ain't you!" said the owner of the shanty, wonderingly, and as if the dishevelled and exhausted young creature on his doorstep had been very lately in his musings. He stared at her curiously, regardless of the biting and laden wind that pushed its way into the room, snapped at some saucepans on the table and sent them crashing to the floor.

"I think — I had better — I think — you must let me in," said Josephine, stammeringly, glancing forlornly at the big figure in the doorway, so effectually shutting in the longed-for warmth of the untidy, bachelor room.

"Why, sure, what am I thinkin' about? Come along in and thaw yourself out there by the fire," said Frank LaDue, after a hesitation that was not perceptible to Josephine because of her overpowering fatigue. "I call that downright ornery in me to keep a poor little frost-bitten doggie like you standin' out in this blizzard, I do for a fact. Just herd your feet up there to the stove and make yourself to home."

Josephine crept in gladly and sank down upon a chair while a pleasing stupor gradually stole over her senses. She was speedily brought back to the present, however, by her host, who was

THE HOMESTEADERS

somewhat roughly demanding of her an explanation of the fool's errand that had brought her out in the blizzard. He still stood, and standing, seemed a colossal figure indeed to the girl crouching by the rusty but roaring stove. His size and general air of capability inspired her with hope. His head almost reached the low, dingy ceiling. His hands were jammed down into his trousers' pockets. Josephine sprang up, her lethargy slipping from her in the shock of her momentarily forgotten but now vividly remembered purpose.

"Mr. LaDue, it is Jack," she began earnestly. "He started after the cattle, oh, a long time ago—hours ago, I think—and—he has not come home. He is lost in this terrible storm. He can never find his way through it. He does not know anything about your kind of storms—they are so awful. Oh, if he had only stayed safely at home! What did the cattle matter?"

"Which goes to show that all the idjits ain't dead yet," said the islander, with what seemed like heartless indifference, taking his hands from his pockets only long enough to roll and light a cigarette. "Unless he is already laid out flat in some gully where he stopped to rest."

"And it would be useless for me to try to find

JOSEPHINE CARROLL

him," said Josephine, shuddering wofully because of what LaDue had just said.

"You are right there, my girl," said LaDue, "it would be worse than useless. If he can't find his way, he surely can't expect a slip of a woman critter to find it for him. Like enough he'll come out of it all right anyway. So stop worryin' about it, and you can bunk right here by the fire to-night and in the mornin' you can skin across the slough good and early and I'll bet you find him safe and sound in bed, wonderin' where the devil you are. Take off your duds and I'll get supper ready."

"I thought — I hoped —" faltered Josephine, and stopped. Controlling herself, she went on with a quiet dignity. "I had thought that perhaps to you who have lived in this country so many years this might not be so dreadful a storm after all. I have made a mistake. I do not ask anything of you. I must go myself." She started for the door a little blindly.

"Why did n't you say that was what you was after in the beginning?" demanded her host, gruffly. "There ain't no more use in my huntin' for that there tenderfoot in this blizzard than there'd be in lookin' for an unbranded calf after

THE HOMESTEADERS

an Injun had been hangin' round for a spell, and that 's as strong an argument as I can put up. No tellin' where in thunder he is by this time. Anyway, his chances o' showin' up safe and sound are a damned sight better than yours or mine would be o' runnin' down that yearlin' and ropin' him in this cussed storm. He comes with the wind, but we'd have to face it, and God A'mighty knows nobody could stand that long. Supposin' I managed to make the gulch — he'd ten to one have passed me on the way. Frank LaDue ain't no coward — but he's only got one life to live and he don't believe in throwin' it away on a fool's errand."

"Please do not think that I ask — or expect — any man to risk his life for a forlorn hope," said Josephine, with a trembling voice. "I came to you because I did not know — the situation was so — desperate — and there was no one else." She wrapped her shawl about her and again started for the door.

"You ain't goin' out again, are you? Say, I don't like that. You'd better stay. If you get lost, that kid'll have to answer for the death o' both o' you. You would n't like that, would you? This ain't no country for green kids and women,

JOSEPHINE CARROLL

nohow. It beats the devil how some folks think they can cut away from everything they've been used to and educated for, just set down on a God-forsaken prairie in Winter that they don't know nothin' about, fold their white hands and expect bread and butter to come a-walkin' up to 'em on legs and pop down their gullets like a snake-charmed bird without puttin' them to the trouble o' chewin', even. They feel hurt if it does n't come jest that easy. Some folks seem to think good money grows on bushes out in this here country. Well, mebbe 't would if there were any bushes for it to grow on. Snow banks and baked grass and dry sand don't make a first-rate soil for that kind o' crop. But about the kid. If you don't find him at home in the morning, well, there 's no earthly way o' helpin' it—and no one to blame but himself. You stay here to-night. That 's the advice of an old-timer and it 's free."

Without a word in reply, but with a sob in her throat, Josephine turned and left him. He followed her to the door and watched her as the storm caught her up and whirled her into its midst. There was the same curious smile upon his face that had been there when he confronted

THE HOMESTEADERS

this girl on his threshold. When she had disappeared into the swirl, he shut the door and sat down upon the chair Josephine had so lately vacated. Presently, he arose, reached for his hat, twirled it around undecidedly, sat down again, rolled and lighted a fresh cigarette, got up, slouched to the door as if still undecided, and put his hand upon the knob.

As for Josephine, she made her way with great difficulty back to the house. Jack was not there. Early night was closing in. The room was fast growing cold. She replenished the dying fire mechanically, numb to all feeling but that a weak and untried girl stood alone in a darkening world to defy the cruel arrogance of the elements and the cowardly helplessness of man. Although it was not yet altogether night, she put a light in the window, steeled herself anew against the despair that was creeping over her, opened the door and once more stepped outside. She turned her face resolutely to the north—to find Jack.

CHAPTER II

NEIGHBOR NUMBER TWO

BY the time Jack reached the far side of the gulch where the cattle were usually to be found the storm was in full swing. The cold was intense. The snow blinded and choked him. The wind seemed possessed of seven devils in the strength of its will not only to halt his further progress, but to force him back over the way he had just come, for every inch of which he had fought doggedly and persistently. The like of such a winter storm he had never seen or felt before, but he pressed on undaunted by its strange intensity.

He was a slender young fellow, but was knit together with muscular litheness and was perhaps as much at home in the saddle as any denizen of the range, barring dexterity with the rope. He had begun riding at an early age when his slim brown legs scarcely reached the beginning of the downward curve of the broad-backed farm horses, as he rode them to water by grace of the

THE HOMESTEADERS

farm hands, who always liked the daring little chap well. The training thus early begun was continued through the later years, when his father allowed him to ride the hunters, only occasionally at first; after a while, whenever and wherever it pleased him. He had not been long in the cattle country before he discovered that there was a vast difference in temperament and training between a Kentucky hunter and a range-bred, mongrel cayuse, but he did not hesitate in adapting himself to the changed conditions in horse flesh and soon had as complete a mastery over the obstinate whims of his cow ponies as he had ever possessed over the daintier fancies of his thoroughbreds of the past. He was a good rider. Seasoned cowmen granted him that distinction ungrudgingly. He had yet to prove his "staying qualities." It was generally considered only a question of a little time when the "young un" should have fretted away his limited stock of endurance and have slipped away in a night and the wide spaces would know him no more.

Jack himself had no doubts or qualms shadowing his future. Even the gloom and menace of the storm pressing around him left his sunny

NEIGHBOR NUMBER TWO

spirit unterrorized. It did not occur to him for a long time that he was in serious personal danger. Although he could scarcely see an animal six feet away, he was conscious of no premonitory dread for his own safety. If he could only round up his whole bunch—which was not so many but that one choked down and left behind would be a serious misfortune—and get it safely headed for home, he had not the shadow of a misgiving as to his own ability to find his way with the ice-laden wind at his back instead of cutting and slapping and tearing away at his face and driving down his throat.

He could not be sure that he had all of his cattle when he finally headed for home, but he was growing strangely tired all at once, and some way it did n't seem to matter so much as it did a while ago, whether his herd was saved intact or whether two or three dropped by the wayside. Cattle were only cattle anyway. He found himself thinking, with the morbid pathos of one forever on the outside, of Josephine's fireside, of the warm glow from the open drafts of the stove, of the good smell of sizzling bacon and the taste of the flapjacks browned in its gravy. It began to seem to him as he

THE HOMESTEADERS

plodded drowsily along that these things, delicious as they were, belonged to a far distant past, a past of dreams, unreal, fast slipping away, while he himself must just trudge along — and along — through the cold, blinding, heartless swirl of the snow. He shook himself savagely, resenting the physical weakness that directed his thoughts into such morbid channels. Through the white void, he could see dim, dark shapes plunging ahead, now appearing, now disappearing, like frolicsome ghosts of haunted slumber, the shrieking of the gale covering up the sound of their running footfalls. The rain of the morning had now frozen into the ground, which presented a hard, smooth surface, over which the snow was blown furiously, skipping into the air again, finding but little resting place on the glassy level. In places, however, it had begun to drift, especially in the gulches and washouts. So completely was everything blotted out by the storm that the first intimation Jack had that he had reached the big gulch on his return journey was when his cow pony with accustomed feet took the first downward slip of the steep incline. There was considerable drift in the gulch through which the horse floundered

NEIGHBOR NUMBER TWO

gallantly while Jack gave him the rein and trusted to his instinct to pick up the trail on the other side of the drift.

“Suffering Moses!” cried Jack, suddenly and sharply, as he felt the first shock of the stumble. He jerked the loosened rein quickly, but it was too late. At some time, water had washed out an ugly hole on one side of the path in the bottom of the gulch. Jack had known that it was there. So doubtless had his horse; but in the blinding storm it was impossible to see it or to locate its position definitely. Into this washout the pony stumbled and horse and rider were thrown violently to the ground. The horse scrambled up quickly, but Jack lay quite still for a moment, the sudden, sharp pain that seemed to originate in his right leg and then to spread instantaneously over his whole body, obliterating all sense of everything but the sense of its own agony. It was not for long. Through the mists of his fast creeping numbness, one thought stood forth startlingly clear, and that was the absolute hopelessness of his situation should his horse leave him and go home alone. The thought spurred him to a desperate reach for the bridle rein. It was too late. The horse, apparently

THE HOMESTEADERS

unhurt, had scrambled to its feet and before Jack could prevent gave a lunge forward and started up the other side of the gulch.

“You—you—traitor,” cried Jack, aloud, and fell back upon his bed of snow, despairing, yet with a half smile on his lips as if to him there was something comical in the contemplation of his utter helplessness. He was of a people to whom personal fear was a crime; but he was also of a people who never gave up—till they had to. He was in intense pain—he thought his leg must be broken—a pain that made his eyes filmy with unseeing so that it was not the snow alone that blinded him. Even breathing was pain, for he was choked by the cutting snow. But he did not intend to lie there and freeze to death without an effort to prove the futility of all effort. Perhaps he might even crawl the rest of the way home. He should at least try it—just as soon as he recovered a little from the shock of his fall and the pain of his broken leg. Three-quarters of a mile through fast drifting snow did not present a very hopeful outlook, but there was nothing else left to do. There was no one to help him in all the world except Josephine. There was no one to miss him or even to

NEIGHBOR NUMBER TWO

know that he needed help—except Josephine. The island woodchopper was the only man on this side of the river for many a mile, and there was no earthly way of his knowing his neighbor's plight. The scant half-mile that separated their cabins might just as well have been ten for all the comfort or aid one could count on in this isolating storm. How could LaDue know that he had ridden into the void when he, Jack, could scarcely discern one of his own creatures six feet away? No, there was only Josephine, and the trouble was that Josephine would be sure to start out in search of him after a while. If it were not for that, perhaps he might snuggle down in the soft snow and rest—and perhaps sleep—until morning, or at least until the storm fell away—he was so very tired—but always there was Josephine. She would start out—there was nothing on earth that could prevent Josephine's coming to look for him—he knew Jo. When night came and he had not returned, she would come. There was not a doubt of it in the world. But she would never find him. She would get lost herself and die in the storm before ever she could come anywhere near the gulch. Even if she realized the utter foolhardiness of her

THE HOMESTEADERS

action, still would she come. For this reason, he must crawl home before she started out — if he could. He shook off the growing lassitude that was fast fettering his limbs, summoned all his powers of endurance to his aid, and began the slow, tortuous climb up the side of the gulch, dragging his useless leg painfully after him.

He had almost gained the level when he slipped, lost his hold, and slid back almost to the bottom again. Even then he gripped his self-control so tightly that his will prevented him from losing consciousness, although he was dizzy with pain and laboring for breath and altogether exhausted after the gigantic effort he had made and its failure. He was in desperate straits. He knew it well. He had known it from the moment his grasp had fallen short of the dangling bridle rein. There had been a fighting chance only. He had taken it and failed. The only point to be considered now was whether or not there was any way to keep oneself from freezing to death until the storm abated. It would probably fall away towards morning. Not that it mattered much—only on account of Josephine. Always the thought of Josephine caused him to struggle

NEIGHBOR NUMBER TWO

free of the almost overpowering desire to just lie still and rest.

All at once, his listless gaze, in which there was no hope, was caught and held by the dark blur of an overhanging bank on the north side of the gulch and a very short distance away. He knew by the distinctness with which he could see its outlines through the white that the snow was drifting in front of it, leaving the hollow bare and helping to form a sort of cave where he might find shelter from the snow and wind—that is, if he could only get there.

He did get there at last, and lay white and panting close up to the dirt side on the north, free from the cruel beat of the wind and bite of the snow for the first time since the door of the Broken Key had slammed behind him—hours ago. The relief was intense. It was not for long, however. The cold was bitter and he had so little strength left with which to fight it. His little sister Jo could never find him away up here—never—and how could he ever see her when she came into the gulch in search of him if she was able to get so far? Well, if he died and Jo did not, there was this comforting thought which he meant to hug to himself after a

THE HOMESTEADERS

while to make the end easier—there were no better men nor more manly in all the wide world than the men of the range. They would see to it that little Jo went safely home again when it was all over. Suffering Moses! How cold it was! Funny how sleepy he was when it was not even dark as yet. Thank God, the pain in his leg had ceased. It was probably not broken after all. Suddenly he laughed a low, whimsical laugh at his own expense. He had actually been afraid that he was going to die—he had even nearly whimpered in maudlin self-pity because he had to die so uselessly—when instead of dying, he was merely going to sleep. He had mistaken the feeling. He was sleepy, sleepy, sleepy, that was all—not dying.

“Halloo—o—o— ! Halloo—o—o— ! Halloo—o—o— !”

It was a faint cry at first, but it grew steadily louder. Sometimes it seemed to come from one direction, sometimes from another exactly opposite. Sometimes it was loud and piercing as if cried directly at the heap of drifted snow up under the dark, overhanging bank. Again, it was fainter, as if cried down the valley and borne away on the wind. But always it grew stronger.

NEIGHBOR NUMBER TWO

“Halloo—o—o— ! Halloo—o—o— ! Halloo—o—o— !”

It was a weird cry, sounding through the fast gathering gloom.

“Halloo—o—o— ! Halloo—o—o— ! Halloo—o—o— !”

It was repeated many, many times before it gradually dawned upon the failing senses of the young homesteader that this thing that he heard and had been hearing so long was not a phantasy of a disordered brain, but a human voice, smothered and unnatural, maybe, because of the thick, undulating blanket it was compelled to penetrate, but a human voice none the less—and a man’s voice at that. No woman—least of all, Josephine—had lung power to sustain so vigorous and prolonged a calling, storm-beaten as she would be after having come so far. He lay another minute after his big discovery, wondering drowsily what the man wanted. Doubtless he was lost, too. Funny that he himself in like straits had never thought to call for help. Perhaps the utter uselessness of it all had restrained him unconsciously. He had never once thought to call aloud and yet here was a fellow creature yelling lustily for succor and there was some one to hear him. Per-

THE HOMESTEADERS

haps had he called — He lay for another full minute, idly pitying the man's plight before the thought came to him that it might perhaps be well to give the poor fellow an answering hail. He had found good shelter. He would share it. He sat up dizzily, found that he could not bear the new position, and fell back again. The effort had taken all his reserve strength and he lay very quiet for a long time, placidly deaf to that insistent "Halloo — o — o —" out there in the swirl of the storm.

"Halloo—o—o— ! Halloo—o—o—o— !
Halloo — o — o — o — ! Jack!"

Was it possible that the man said "Jack"? Why, Jack was his own name. Once more he struggled to a sitting posture.

"Halloo—o— !" he cried, weakly, conscious that the cry which gave him so much pain and effort to make was riddled and blown to pieces long before it reached half way down the gulch.

"Halloo—o— !" he cried again, striving desperately to make his voice carry. "Halloo—o—o— ! Halloo—o—o— ! Halloo—o—o— !" With each repetition, his voice grew stronger —until at last it was heard, for, "Halloo,

NEIGHBOR NUMBER TWO

where are you?" came the shouted question immediately after his last call.

"Halloo—here—north bank—just over—" his voice died away.

"Halloo, there, keep calling—I can't find you—halloo—o—o—! Halloo—o—o—! Keep calling!"

The words were fairly whipped from the mouth of the seeker, for he was heading directly up the north bank in the very face of the wind.

"Halloo—o—!" came a faint response and then there were no more answers to the persistent calling. It had grown very quiet up there on the other side of the drift.

When Jack regained consciousness, there was a comfortable feeling of warmth in his throat that satisfied him for the time being. Soon he felt with surprise that he was warm all over and extremely comfortable only for that sharp, jumping ache in his leg; and, how easy it was to breathe! The storm must have fallen away. He opened his heavy eyes. Josephine was softly chafing his hands. He saw her before he realized that he was lying upon his own bed and that the nightmare was ended. A brandy flask lay upon the table by the bedside. A light flared and splut-

THE HOMESTEADERS

tered in the window. Listening, he heard the howling of the wind as it swept around the corners of the house. It must be the night of the same day, and yet he felt infinitely older.

"I think—my leg is broken, Jo," he said, faintly, and added, smilingly, "I'm not a bird nor a chicken nor a dog, but I reckon you'll have to draw on your ancient experience in binding up the wounds of our old pets and practise on me. I'm game. I promise not to faint. Let 'er go, Gallagher!" He closed his eyes expectantly.

"A better one than I has done that for you already, Jack, dear boy," said Josephine, turning with a grateful smile to a weather-browned, muscular young fellow standing quietly by the fire. "Your poor broken bones are all nicely set. You lost consciousness, you know, up there under the bank and—the man who found you carried you home and set your leg without your knowing anything about it. But you must n't talk any more, Jack. You will work yourself into a fever if you do."

"Lucky dog—I—to fall plunk into the path of a doctor. How did it happen, Jo?"

"I do not think our friend—I have n't learned his name yet—is a doctor. He just knew how.

NEIGHBOR NUMBER TWO

Will you go to sleep if I tell you how it happened? Promise me."

"All right. Let 'er go, Gallagher!"

His eyelids drooped with drowsiness. He saw the big, still figure by the fire through a far-removing haze of pain-coaxed sleep.

"I had left the house to look for you, Jack," began Josephine, quietly, "but I had not gone very far when I met this gentleman. He had been caught in the storm and was hastening home, but when he learned that you were lost he just bundled me back into the house without any ceremony at all, put up his horse and struck out after you—all alone—Jack, these men of the West are God's own—" her voice broke a little—"and he found you and brought you back to me—and—"

"That was mighty clever of you, LaDue," said Jack, striving to keep awake until he had said what he wanted to say. "You are a generous man. I have not quite understood you. I hope you will not hold it against me. Shake on it, won't you?"

The stranger approached the bedside and took the weak, extended hand in a warm, firm grasp.

"I am glad you are all right, Carroll," he said,

THE HOMESTEADERS

quietly, "but your eyes play you false. You are suffering much pain. It blinds you. I am not LaDue, but Burrington. You remember Tom Burrington of the Seven-up, don't you?"

CHAPTER III

THE BEGINNING OF A QUARREL

THE next day, rather early in the morning, the storm having died in the night, a young fellow with wide open, baby blue eyes, that softened wonderfully the stalwart, self-reliant effect of a pair of unusually broad shoulders, rode up to the door of the Broken Key.

The Broken Key homestead-ranch had been thus quaintly called because of a little incident that had occurred shortly after young Carroll had taken up residence on his claim. He had just returned one day in the late Summer from a long ride to Velpen for the mail and, the time being ripe for choosing and registering a brand for his newly acquired stock, was thinking deeply about the subject when he suddenly broke his key in a vain attempt to turn it in a plugged keyhole. He had been very angry at first, but in the end had reasoned that he himself had been much at fault. He remembered having heard something, sometime, about the free-masonry that existed on the range in regard to the unwritten law of the hang-

THE HOMESTEADERS

ing latch string. It was very probable that some one in passing had resented the inhospitality of the locked door. He was genuinely sorry. He should not forget again. That same week, he perfected his design of a broken key and registered it upon the books of the county.

"The Boss said you was in need of a hand, so I thought I'd just step up to see if I'd do," said the young fellow with the baby blue eyes on the morning after the big storm. He was in manifest confusion in the presence of Josephine.

"Are n't you rather—young?" asked Josephine, hesitatingly. She had come to the door in a morning gown of small-checked blue gingham and her unexpected daintiness served to enhance visibly the young man's embarrassment.

"Bless you," he grinned, awkwardly, "I've been punchin' cows and wranglin' horses since I was knee-high-to-a-grasshopper. That's my business, Misses."

"Are you quite sure that you are old enough to vote?" asked Josephine, smiling at his boyishly expressed self-esteem.

"You bet I am. Why, Misses, I ain't no year-lin' nor yet a two-year old. I cut my eye teeth ages ago. Besides, I come from Texas. The

A QUARREL

babes know how to herd down there and any old time they'd a mind to call your Northern bluff at ranchin' they'd make you look exactly plumb like a balloon with a hole in it."

All at once, his brief while of easy self-assertiveness passed away and it was as if it had never been. The laugh died while a vacant, wistful look crept into his eyes.

"Please, Misses, take me," he said, coaxingly, like a child.

"And you say Mr. Burrington sent you?" questioned Josephine, trying to be wise and business-like for Jack's sake.

"He said your man was thrown and would have to lay off for a spell and he said I could come and help you out if I wanted to and you was agreeable. He said you had n't asked for no help but he knew you needed it and I could stay as long as you wanted me to and my place 'd be waitin' for me at the Seven-up when you was through with me. I been punchin' for the Boss for a year."

"Well, I reckon you may stay until my brother is able to ride again," said Josephine. "Many of the cattle have strayed—"

"Oh, and I was to tell you that some of your

THE HOMESTEADERS

cattle was found feedin' with a Seven-up bunch on the home range this mornin' and that you ain't to worry about 'em because they are all right where they are and the Boss 'll take care of 'em," interrupted the new hand, importantly.

"The rest need to feed. Will you see to them now?" asked Josephine, quietly.

It was thus that Henry Hoffman became a temporary resident of Jack Carroll's homestead.

Three tedious weeks passed before the young Southerner was able even to make use of crutches. A doctor had come out from Velpen the third day after the accident, had approved cordially of Tom Burrington's amateur surgery, rebound the break, and had then left the patient to make his gallant fight with Josephine's help, only, against much pain and fever and delirium and the deadly weariness of inactivity. At the end of that time, he arose from his bed, hobbled painfully to the window and looked out, yearningly. Warm weather was fast setting in. There was a feeling of Spring in the air, though the gulches and draws were yet full of snow. The loftier hilltops only had thrust their crests, brown and brooding, from out the white-streaked underworld. Tier after tier of these sombre-capped

A QUARREL

hills lay between the edge of the bottom land and the high horizon.

"To-morrow, Josephine, I ride to the Seven-up and bring back our strays. Yes, to-morrow sees me in the saddle again. You need not smile in such a superior fashion, Jo. I shall surely go if I want to." He was smiling, well-knowing his absolute inability to make his rash assertion good—but how he longed for the feel of leather between his knees once more! He thrummed on the pane with his thin hands impatiently.

"Why worry about the cattle?" asked Josephine, calmly. "Mr. Burrington sends us word that they are doing very well with his herd. You ought to be thankful that they drifted into such comfortable quarters during that terrible storm when they might have run till they starved or have fallen and frozen to death, instead of lamenting the fact that you cannot have your eyes upon them all the time. Next week, perhaps, if you take care of yourself, you may be able to ride to the Seven-up after your storm-strays. To-morrow, you may—" she paused, tantalizingly. "To-morrow, you may—hobble down to the barn," she concluded, as one granting a favor.

THE HOMESTEADERS

"We'll see," grumbled the sick man, rebelliously.

But when to-morrow came, he was content to take his crutches and hobble down to the barn. A few more brown peaks on the lower tiers had poked their heads free of the white blankets. The season of melting weather had begun in earnest. A horse in the ash sapling corral whinnied softly in pleased recognition of his long absent master. It was he who had deserted on the night of the big storm, but he was glad to feel the familiar presence again. He put out his nose for Jack to stroke and rubbed against his shoulder caressingly. The barnyard premises seemed otherwise deserted. The boy, Henry Hoffman, was out with the remnant of the herd. The young Texan had proved himself a good workman in spite of his apparent youthfulness. The homesteaders would have been glad to retain his services for an indefinite period had their resources warranted it. Resting his arms idly on the palings, drinking in the soft air with lazy content, Jack was presently aware that his horse was not the only other creature near. From the south side of the haystack every now and then came a glint of red. He watched it come and go with

A Q U A R R E L

indolent curiosity. It was not long before a red head with soft brown eyes appeared around the stack and returned his gaze placidly, still munching hay.

"Hello, there!" he said aloud, in surprise. "Why are n't you out with the herd, young fellow? Henry must be getting careless. Well, stuff a-plenty now, for you won't get away again in a hurry."

He picked up his crutches and prepared to drive the straying calf into the protection of the corral.

"By the great jumpin' Jerusalem," he whistled, softly, "if the prodigal has n't returned! What a pity that in this instance the prodigal and the fatted calf are one and the same person. It would be funny, would n't it, to kill the fatted calf to make a feast for this prodigal. Why, are n't you the runaway, after all?"

The exclamation was called forth by the unexpected sight of a brand on the calf's side. One evening, fully a month before the great storm, this same calf, born the preceding Spring, had failed to return with the herd. It had been running with the cattle only a short time, as Jack had kept it at home and fed it with his own hands

THE HOMESTEADERS

after weaning it from its mother, whom he wanted for a milch cow. He had never branded it.

"You've been sowing some wild oats, I'm afraid, my lad," said Jack, "but I hope you have learned your lesson and will be content to stay at home in the future. Hello! LaDue!"

The island woodchopper was riding slowly by, apparently with no intention of halting, but in answer to Jack's hail, he rode leisurely up to the corral and threw one leg over the pommel of his saddle and, thus resting, surveyed his neighbor with careless curiosity.

"You see I'm out again," said Jack, sociably inclined. "I hope soon to be on my cowboy legs again."

"You're lookin' sort o' peaked, 'pears to me," said LaDue.

"Oh, that 's just because Josephine has made such a house plant of me since my accident," explained Jack, with a smile. "That was a tolerably good-sized blizzard, was n't it? I hope you don't have many such."

"I was never out in a worse," said LaDue.

"Then you were out in it, after all," said Jack, suddenly grown serious. "I—did not know."

The man flushed through his heavy coat of

A QUARREL

tan. He was oddly embarrassed. "I—tried to make the gulch after the girl left," he said, slowly, "but it was so blamed uncomfortable that I soon gave it up and—came home. I looked for you quite a spell." He spoke hesitatingly, as if he had not meant it to be known that he had been out in the storm and was sorry for his inadvertent admission.

"That was mighty good of you," said Jack, earnestly. "I am glad that you—tried. By the way, LaDue," he continued, relapsing into good-natured raillery. "I wish you'd tell me how your brand managed to stick on to my calf without so much as a 'By your leave, kind sir.' Pretty soon I'll be accusing you of cattle rustling if you don't rope onto a good explanation."

"Your calf! Well, I like your nerve!" said LaDue, laughing grimly, as he glanced critically at the animal in the corral. "How do you make that out, Carroll, when the calf is mine?"

"You must have branded him by mistake," said Jack, still smiling, though a vague doubt began stirring in his mind. He had never understood his odd, profane neighbor. "Why, I raised this fellow by hand, so to speak. I kept him close to the house and barn after having him

THE HOMESTEADERS

weaned and fed him myself until about a month before the storm. I can't be mistaken, LaDue," he concluded, boyishly.

"Neither can I," responded LaDue, a little gruffly, "and I say that I raised that calf myself. I cannot possibly be mistaken. You may call me a cattle thief if you will. It's all one to me. How did that calf get here?"

"He wandered here of his own free will, I reckon," said Jack, perplexedly. "I found him eating serenely away at my haystack yonder. Most animals will come home finally if left to themselves," he added, obstinately.

The man broke into a laugh of ironical amusement.

"Say, kid, why did n't you brand your calf while it was followin' its mother? That's a habit a cattleman gets into A'mighty quick. Why did n't you, eh?"

"Why, I just neglected it," said Jack, frankly. "He was around the house all the time until he was put into the herd and then I drove him in with the rest of the cattle every night until he was lost. I thought I could keep track of him, all right. I meant to brand him after the Spring round-up."

A QUARREL

He was getting very tired and leaned heavily against the fence, his face pale and thin, his brown eyes luminous with the fever of fatigue.

"What a tale for cowmen! They don't do business that way, Carroll. I don't, and I don't pretend to be anything but a woodchopper. But a man can't live among cattlemen without imbibin' some of their goll-darned common sense. Leastwise, I can't. I branded that there calf as soon as I found him taggin' his mother. It's the safest way, friend." Suddenly, he leaned down with an unexpected touch of friendliness in his gruff voice. "I'm sorry," he said, with grave significance, "if you have really lost a calf, but I'm sorrier if — you have n't. The boys don't stand for no foolin', and you're pretty young, kid. They'd be rather rough with you. Don't begin it, young fellow. I'm in earnest. Get out of the country if you can't make a livin' no other way — but whatever you do, don't begin it. I don't hold this against you, you're young and green — I can understand. But take my advice and get out."

"Of course, LaDue," said Jack, wearily — he was very tired now, "I do not want to quarrel with you; so, although I am positive the calf is

THE HOMESTEADERS

mine, you may take him if you like. There is some mistake. I do not doubt that you are honest in your belief, but neither do I doubt my own eyes. Take him. He is yours now at any rate. We will say no more about it. Only—" a sudden flash lighted up his tired eyes—"don't call me a cattle thief again, neighbor. I might—resent it, you know. So long."

LaDue looked curiously at the younger man for a moment. He shrugged his shoulders tolerantly.

"Good," he said, briefly. "I like your grit, anyway. Fight it out for yourself if you will."

He opened the gate of the corral, drove out the disputed calf, and then continued his leisurely way islandwards, driving the calf before him.

"You can prove it, Jack," said Josephine, indignantly, a little later, to Jack, who lay upon the bed worn out after his first exertion. "Prosecute him. We will have our own."

"That's the rub," said Jack, quietly. "We cannot prove it and we are strangers in a strange land. He may be as innocent as we are. It looks, though, as if he had taken advantage of its being

A QUARREL

unbranded, does n't it? Well, the incident is closed and we shall say no more about it. But mark you, Jo, if it should ever happen again I shall fight it out to the last ditch. Remember that."

CHAPTER IV

ONJIJITKA

THE following morning, Josephine rode up into the hills to the west of the Broken Key ranch. She rode astride, for Jack had insisted that she ride so. The hills to be climbed were high, and the ways to their summits were steep. The gulches were deep and narrow, and the cut-aways ugly. Many a deceptive washout lay concealed behind some innocent-looking cedar sapling or bunch of the hard-leaved soap-weed. One did well not only to be wary in choosing one's trail, but to be sure of one's firmness and equipoise in the saddle. So Josephine felt very mannish and confident on that day, riding slowly over the hills. Jack, who had still to wait a little before he could be strong enough to ride again, had begged her to be careful, and she was being careful. She knew that the bluffs and draws, with their blind trails, were vastly different from the gentle slopes of her home land. But she also knew that Jack had given her a

ONJIJITKA

good horse—a native of these hills and one which had been gently broken because she, Josephine, was coming West to ride him.

She was trying the mettle of her new companion and was finding it good. She had always made a companion of her riding horses. She was never content until all the little tricks of temper, manifestations of nervousness, little differences in the niceties of bit control, all the dislikes and the affectations of the new partnership were as a printed page for her just and comprehensive reading. She liked the high spirit and endurance of this rough-coated creature of the range, accepted him joyously and set about to win his love and confidence in return, because it might be that some time much would be required of him for her sake.

The day had become damp and cloudy with moisture, and the wind, rising lightly out of the southwest, went skimming over the hilltops with soft, sibilant whisperings. Someway, it carried a little chill with it, even though it was a promise of melting weather still to come. Josephine, pausing a moment at the brow of a hill, where the indistinct trail she had been unconsciously pursuing dipped into a valley, hesitated to go

THE HOMESTEADERS

farther, and thought of the dinner that it was her lot to prepare, a household task that she, unaccustomed to its exactions, had forgotten while the sun shone.

Into the range of her vision as she gazed thoughtfully across the valley, rode a horse-woman. This rider did not pause on the opposite hilltop as Josephine had paused, but rode steadily down into the ravine, apparently without knowledge of the near presence of another human life in the solemn solitude of the hills. She came out of the southwest and she rode easily and as well as Josephine rode, astride. It was not until after she had crossed the valley and was climbing the hill where Josephine awaited her approach with a curious little throb of something akin to homesickness engendered by the unexpected nearness of one of her own kind that Josephine perceived, with a shock of disappointment, that the stranger's feet were encased in beaded moccasins. With this rather startling exception, however, she was dressed much as Josephine was dressed, with leggings, dark blue serge skirt, short jacket, and fur cap. This was noticeable, however, that while Josephine's cap was of sealskin, hers was of beaver, a relic of the days when her trapper



“How do you do?” answered the stranger, in a clear, sweet voice”

ONJITKA

ancestors still found beaver along the waterways of the Dakotas.

"How do you do," said Josephine.

"How do you do," answered the stranger, in a clear, sweet voice. She stopped before Josephine, and it was then that Josephine received the second surprise of the unexpected encounter. The moccasins had belied the stranger, after all. Her skin was almost as fair as Josephine's own and her cheeks were flushed with color. Her head was as proudly held, with even a touch of its patrician poise. Her dark eyes met Josephine's frankly curious gaze with reserve.

"I am, you know," she added, unexpectedly.

"Are what?" asked Josephine, in surprise.

"Dakotah."

Josephine held out her hand with a quick gesture of impulsive friendliness.

"I should never have guessed it," she said, honestly. "But that need not hinder our being friends, need it? I have been afraid that I was going to be very lonely, sometimes. I did not know there were any girls west of the river. My name is Josephine Carroll and I live at the Broken Key."

The girl hesitated a moment, drawing back

THE HOMESTEADERS

slightly; then she changed her mind and accepted Josephine's proffered hand-clasp with grave formality.

"My name is Onjijitka, which in English means Rosebud, and I live on the Rosebud Reservation," she said simply.

"That is a very pretty name," replied Josephine. "I am afraid it will take me some time to learn to pronounce it correctly in Indian, so for the present, at least, I will call you Rosebud, if you don't mind."

"They called me Rosebud at school, and nearly everybody around here calls me that, except the Indians," the girl said.

"You were going toward the river?" questioned Josephine. "I was about to return and will ride with you if you do not object. I am my brother's housekeeper and must hasten to get the dinner pot to boiling," she chatted easily, with a mixture of girlish pride in the new dignity of her position and an honest desire to show a friendly spirit to this girl of another race. Even in her light chatter, her voice retained the soft, drawling cadence implanted there by her Southern birth and training, and which was fast becoming irresistible to the half-breed girl.

ONJIJITKA

"You have been to school at Hampton, have you not?" she questioned, wondering at the continued silence of her new companion.

"Notre Dame," said Rosebud, laconically.

"Oh!" said Josephine, blankly. "Then you are a Romanist?" she added presently, determined to make this girl talk if she sat there all day asking questions.

"I suppose so."

"Are you crossing the river to-day?" ventured Josephine again. "Perhaps we had better be starting back," she suggested, pointing Long Chase's nose homeward.

"I am going to Velpen," answered Rosebud, falling into step beside Josephine.

"Then you must stop at the Broken Key and dine with us," exclaimed Josephine, as the ponies started briskly forward. "I will have dinner ready in no time. You will, won't you? Promise me," insisted Josephine.

"I should like to," hesitated Rosebud, "but it has been a long time since I ate with any of — your people. I am afraid I should not know how to act."

"I do not believe that," said Josephine, earnestly. "Besides, there are only Jack and I and

THE HOMESTEADERS

we are very plain people, I assure you, and live in a very plain manner. Surely you will not refuse to dine with us because of our limited capabilities for serving a good meal, will you?" she concluded laughingly.

"I thank you," said Rosebud, soberly. "I will eat with you since you are so good as to ask me. I did not expect to eat at a white man's table again. But Josephine Carroll has—a way, and Onjijitka does not know how to refuse."

"Don't you like white people?" asked Josephine.

"Yes, I like you—some of you," said Rosebud, her native reserve giving way at last. "But you do not like me. You do not like me as well as you like my mother, who is all Dakotah. I went away to Notre Dame because my mother's people did not like me very well and I thought I'd learn to be white. I learned—almost. I learned this much and then I had to stop: that I might learn to read and write, comb my hair according to the mode, wear abominable stiff corset things, sing and dance and play the piano and embroider and—oh, so many, many things that are required, you know how many—but that I never could be white. I spent four years learn-

ONJIJITKA

ing all this and then I found at the very last that you had lied to me—you white people. My blood is mixed, and that, you say, is a barrier raised by heaven itself and as irrevocable as death. I beat my heart out until it was all bruised and bleeding; with sorrow at first, then with rage, because you had lied to me, you know, and then because I would not be a dog of a half-breed, to fawn upon the white man,” she said, her voice vibrating with the fierce pride of her haughty Sioux forefathers who had been hereditary chiefs, “I came back to my people. My father was dead and my mother had married Two Hawks. They accepted me. When I was little, my mother called me Onjijitka. All my people call me that now, though at school I was known as Rosebud Gireaux. Gireaux was my father’s name. I am all Dakotah now.”

This was not true—this latter statement—and Josephine, with quick sympathy, knew that it was not. If she were in truth content to hark back wholly to the Indian ways, why then this dress of the pale face and why then this sombre speech with its tang of bitterness?

“Let us be friends, you and me,” said Josephine, as their ponies took the homeward stretch

THE HOMESTEADERS

toward the little cabin with its thin spiral of smoke climbing idly up into the damp air. The sight sent a queer little home thrill through her heart. Strange, when she had thought there was to be no end to the longing for the sunny land of her nativity, though Jack was never to know that. "This land of yours is so big and lonesome, Rosebud. Shall we be friends always?"

"You are very good. I should like to be friends. When Rosebud visits Miss Josephine Carroll at the Broken Key, well and good. I should know what to do. At Notre Dame, many took me to be just French—my father was a French Indian trader in the Red Lake country, you know—and the good sisters taught me some of their ways. But when Miss Josephine Carroll comes to visit at the tepee of Two Hawks, Rosebud will have forgotten and what will Miss Josephine Carroll do then?"

"I do not care where you live," cried Josephine, impulsively, "we are going to be friends, are we not?"

"Always," said Rosebud, gravely.

Dinner was smoking on the table when Jack swung up the path on his crutches, whistling a gay measure the while, well content with all the

ONJIIITKA

world just then, notwithstanding his tedious convalescence and the fact that he had so recently disagreed with his neighbor. Josephine was home and she would have a spanking hot dinner all ready. After that there would be a bit of a smoke and a chat, maybe, about that time coming when there would be a realization of all their ultra-optimistic dreams, and there should be cattle on a thousand hills for John Calhoun and Josephine Carroll. So the whistle on his lips was very gay and the content in his handsome eyes was very pronounced when he threw open the door of his cabin and sent his new hat—a real Stetson this time, he had learned the proper thing in hats since his tenderfoot days—spinning across the floor. It was then that he saw Rosebud.

“I beg your pardon,” he said at once, with ready courtesy.

“Rosebud, my brother Jack,” said Josephine, placing the steaming coffee pot upon the table and looking altogether charming in a gingham apron, her cheeks flushed with recent proximity to the stove. “Jack, Miss Rosebud Gireaux.”

“Welcome to the Broken Key,” Miss Gireaux,” said Jack.

THE HOMESTEADERS

"Thank you," said Rosebud, simply.

"Rosebud and I are already the very best of friends," explained Josephine, as they seated themselves around the table with its square of white linen which Josephine had brought with her from that far away Southland. "And we are going to be together a great deal in the time to come. Now that you are discovered, Rosebud, it will not be easy for you to get away from me."

"I shall not want to," said Rosebud, seriously.

"I should like to know where I come in on this," spoke up Jack, a laugh in his eyes. "You girls seem to be leaving me altogether out of the count. I shall not submit to it, I assure you."

"Oh, now that I have Rosebud," scoffed Josephine, "you can take care of yourself. Men are dreadfully in the way, are they not, Rosebud?"

"Now, Miss — Rosebud," remonstrated Jack, "don't you go to siding in with Josephine there. You know you'd like to have me around sometimes, now, would n't you?" he wheedled. "I am a pretty good sort of a fellow, really."

He was much amused by this play of nonsense. He was much of a boy still, though he was seven and twenty. Besides, she was a very pretty girl — there was no getting around that. He won-

ONJIJITKA

dered what she would say. She did not seem like a girl who would enter into raillery with the joyous abandon of many girls whom he had known in the past.

"If you are like Josephine," she replied gravely, "you cannot help being good. As for your being in the way, that I cannot answer, because I never knew before any one — like you."

It was late when Rosebud, returning, crossed the ice again and was slipping noiselessly past the ranch of the Broken Key on her way to the tepee of Two Hawks. It was dark, too, with that damp, warm, cloudy darkness that comes with the melting of many snows. A light, burning steadily, shone through the window. Josephine and Jack were still up then. Perhaps Josephine was reading aloud while Jack rested, stretched out upon the wolfskin that she had noticed on the floor by the fire, his hands under his head, maybe. Or it might be that there was silence between them while each dreamed his dream. She was glad now that she had worn her moccasins. She could creep up unheard and unseen and satisfy that unexplainable longing which was hers. They would never know and she would see again the man whose like she had

THE HOMESTEADERS

never known before. She slipped lightly from her saddle and crept forward soundlessly with all the cunning stealth of her Sioux ancestry coming to the exultant aid of this their child. Before she had half covered the distance she stopped suddenly. It meant that she should have to bear for all time the cross of blood. It meant that she could never again know content in the lazy, degenerating existence of Two Hawks. As long as she lived now she would have to be as white as she could because of — Josephine? Yes, because of Josephine. And Jack? Ah, yes, because of Jack — Jack of the courteous speech, the whistling mouth, and the laughing eyes. Skulking in the shadows was not what they would do — those two in there. She glided back to her pony, mounted, and rode slowly away into the wide and lonely night.

CHAPTER V

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER AND A RESCUE

THE warm weather continued. The older settlers along the Missouri predicted an early break-up of the river. The bluffs were dry and brown and the snow in the deep ravines and pockets of the hills was fast disappearing.

The cattle that had strayed from the Broken Key during the wild storm in which John Calhoun Carroll's leg had been broken had not yet been recovered. But Tom Burrington had reported them as running with his own herds, so the young homesteaders were resting easy in the friendly assurance. There were only a half-dozen or so of them, but it would have been a woful loss at the very beginning of the Carrolls' fight for place in the big land so arrogantly resentful of invasion, where the littleness of man was seemingly an inexorable law and dogged endurance the one hope of the ultimate gaining of a foothold therein.

"Don't you want to ride with me to see Tom?" asked Jack, shortly after the visit of the Indian

THE HOMESTEADERS

girl and when he had at last obtained Josephine's permission to ride. "We can find out about the fool cattle and make a neighborly call at the same time."

"But Mr. Burrington has not called on us yet," objected Josephine.

"Don't you ever believe that," said Jack. "Did he not draw up his horse and chat a bit the other day on his way home? That counts west of the river, my girl."

"I did not see him. He did not ask for me," said Josephine, still loath.

"He asked about you, however; and besides, where would I be now if it had not been for this man Tom Burrington of the Seven-up? You will have to pack away in moth balls some of your old-fashioned, conservative prejudices, Josephine," he counselled, wisely. "Or, better still, bury them altogether. I have," he confessed, with a laugh. "Remember always that we are well within the borders of cattle land. Besides, I shall be gone the better part of the day and I thought it would be lonesome for you here. Come, get on your bonnet. It is a fine day for a ride."

It was a fine day. There was no mistake about

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

that. The air was like June. From the island came the pound of regular blows of an axe upon fallen timber, the rhythmic echoes of which went sounding among the hills. Somewhere within that labyrinth of ancient, lofty, gaunt cottonwoods, of runty, spreading cedars, of gigantic elms, and of the thick growth of straight, slender ash, their neighbor was chopping wood. As they were mounted and ready to start, a man rode into their clearing, a young man with much breadth of shoulder and with lazy-looking eyes.

"Howdy," said the newcomer, indifferently.

"Good-morning," returned Jack. "I thought you went early this morning, Henry. You said last night that you expected to be off before sun-up."

"Yep. I reckon I did. But I thought I'd come back and ask you something. You see I'm out of a job now."

"Well, what is it?" asked Jack, in a fever to be off.

"Who did you say lives over to the island now?"

"A man by the name of LaDue—Frank LaDue. By the way, you might find work over

THE HOMESTEADERS

there. He chops a lot of wood and must need a great deal of help. You see how heavily that island is timbered. Besides, I understand that LaDue runs the ferry during the Summer. He will certainly need assistance then. It won't do any harm to talk to him, anyway. I thought Tom Burrington was keeping your place for you at the Seven-up."

" 'T ain't much of an island now," said Henry Hoffman, evasively.

" No, it is n't, for a fact. But they tell me that during high water a considerable stream flows between it and us."

" Does he keep any cows? " inquired Henry, meditatively. " I'm thinkin' I would n't be a howlin' success topplin' over trees. I'd ruther ride any day. No tellin', though, what we will come to yet, now that the good old days of free grass are turnin' up their toes to the daisies. You fellows are responsible for that."

" Why don't you go West, man? " said Jack, a little impatiently. Was he never to have done with this quarrel against homesteading? " There is free grass in plenty out along the old Black Hills trail. But honestly now, my friend," he argued, with returning good nature, " I acknowl-

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

edge that I am somewhat of a tenderfoot, but are you not asking me to believe a lot when you intimate that you are an old-timer? Have you voted yet?"

"'T ain't because I ain't old enough, if I have n't," said the other with a laugh. "Besides, as I told your sister when I first came here, I've been punchin' cows and wranglin' horses, young fellow, since I was knee-high-to-a-grasshopper. What did you remark about that man LaDue and his critters? Has n't he ary a cow?"

"I think he has a few. I do not know where he keeps them. You had better go and interview him. If you do not come to terms, why, walk right in here and make yourself at home before riding on," said Jack, with ready hospitality. "You will find bacon and bread handy, and there is fresh meat in the shed. Just help yourself, will you? We have a long ride before us and must be getting on."

"Say, Mr. Carroll," advised Henry, "these ain't the good old days I was tellin' you about, you know. Folks mostly lock their doors hereabouts. 'T ain't always then they find things like they left them. Sometimes there won't be nothin' there at all but just a vacuum, savin'

THE HOMESTEADERS

some sky and air, maybe. Well, so long," he called, riding leisurely islandwards.

"What an abnormal breadth of shoulder he has," said Josephine, musingly, "and his eyes are as blue and frank as a child's. Do you know, Jack, that is just what he reminds me of—a great, good-natured, overgrown baby."

Perhaps twenty feet from the shore Tom Burrington had cut a watering place for his cattle, and sanded well the ice between so they would not slip. This trough ran parallel with the central portion of a large airhole, a mile and a half in length and perhaps forty rods in width at its widest place, and a number of feet beyond the ice ditch. The current where the river was open had a curious rotary movement. Tom was riding to the corral to release the cattle therein waiting to be driven to water, when Jack and Josephine rode into view. He swept his wide hat from his head and rode quickly forward.

"You do not know how glad I am that you have come," he said, with a certain grave emphasis. Glancing at Josephine, he could not help wondering how it was that a woman so altogether sweet and good to look upon had chanced to stray to these outer boundaries of the earth.

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

"We are seekers," explained Jack. "You have not been rustling any Broken Key cattle, have you, Tom? I am told of a surety that some are mixed up in your herds. Explanations are in order, and I hope for the sake of our friendship that this little affair may be satisfactorily adjusted," he concluded, whimsically.

Tom laughed; then he held his hands to his lips and sent forth a resonant hail that awoke the echoes in the surrounding hills.

"Forgive me, Miss Carroll," he apologized, "but that boy, Charlie, is around somewhere and I want him. I lost a valuable man this morning," he continued, turning to Jack.

"Henry Hoffman came back a while ago and told me that you no longer needed him," said Jack, "and that he guessed he'd 'be a-movin' on.' "

"He had not been with me long, but he was as good a cowman as I ever knew. He came to this country from Texas a year or two ago. He is a reckless sort of a fellow, but I liked him. I do not know why he left me. He gave no excuse; simply said, when I paid him off this morning, that he guessed he'd 'be a-movin' on.' "

"I referred him to our neighbor, LaDue. He was looking for a job."

THE HOMESTEADERS

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the cowboy, Charlie Moore, riding into the little circle. "Henry Hoffman chop wood? Not muchy! I'd plumb love to see him do it!"

"Well, he is gone, so it does not matter what he does or where he goes," said Tom. "But I was sorry to lose him. Ride to the home range, Charlie, and cut out any Broken Key cattle that may be there. You reported some strays on that pasture, did you not? You had better take some one with you. Drive the bunch here."

"I will go with him," volunteered Jack, "if I may leave Josephine behind."

"By all means," agreed Tom promptly.

"If you will keep on with your work," qualified Josephine.

"It is agreed. I have a hundred head of cattle here which I am bound to deliver to the Lower Brule Indians, in prime condition. The drive begins at two o'clock this afternoon. I have the government contract, as perhaps you know, so I have this to do every month. If you really do not mind, I will just finish this little chore now."

Jack and Charlie rode away. Josephine watched the work of the big ranchman interest-

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

edly, sitting quietly on Long Chase, looking fair and sweet and lovable with the fresh wind blowing loosened tendrils of shining hair about her face, the crimson at her throat making a spot of color in vivid contrast to the dun hues of the hills and the lines of gray timber belting the ravines on the opposite side of the river.

Together with most of the cattlemen of the sterner mould, those who had endured and who now, weather-toughened, hardship-proof, battle-scarred veterans of the wilderness, looking back upon their colossal struggle, were slow to accord to rawer recruits the strength of purpose with which they themselves had been endowed, and counted all tenderfeet weaklings until proved otherwise. Burrington believed that young Carroll and his sister would flit away soon, and that the wide plains and the solemn hills would know them no more. Not that Carroll was not bravehearted and lofty-spirited; but the bravest hearts may be broken by loneliness, and the loftiest spirits sink the lowest when encompassed by unresponsiveness.

Besides, there had never been a girl like Josephine west of the river — never; and because there never had been, he was afraid to look for

THE HOMESTEADERS

her face on the canvas of the future for fear that it would have been blotted out. If only she could be kept until his mother came; that might help to hold her always. But he could not ask his mother to come to him until the harshness of early Spring was well over, not even — and besides, how could he ask her to come now, any way, just because an unusually sweet girl had settled in the neighborhood? The absurdity of it all sent a laugh to his lips as, still mounted, he opened the gate of the huge corral and drove the herd down toward the river. He wore no coat or waist-coat, his heavy blue flannel shirt being all-sufficient for his vigorous and healthy manhood. The soft ends of the white neckerchief knotted around his brown throat fluttered gayly in the light wind.

Separating about ten of the cattle from the main herd, Tom drove them onto the well-sanded ice. Josephine rode closer. She had heard Jack say that cattle seldom stepped on ice unless under compulsion, as they had an inherent fear of it. She was somewhat surprised, therefore, to observe that part of the herd left on shore began to disintegrate and to move forward. The cattle were very dry and Tom was alone. In spite of

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

him, at least thirty impatient, thirsty steers crowded down to drink. Immediately the ice, softened by the long spell of melting weather, began to sink, and the water came up through the cut places and spread over the ice. Leaping from his horse, Tom quickly skirted the cattle, and from the channel side began driving them shoreward. This left the remaining herd masterless, and the whole foolish, thirsty bunch pressed forward to the sanded ice. It was a critical moment. The water already lay six inches deep over the ice. And now it seemed to Josephine that there was only one thing for her to do. She could not sit still and let all those poor creatures drown before her eyes. She must help Tom. Slipping from her saddle, she ran swiftly around the now terrified herd and began pressing the cattle back to the shore.

“My God, Josephine!” cried Tom, not knowing that he called her so, his brown cheeks paling with sudden apprehension. “You will be trampled to death! Keep back!”

At that moment the shore ice gave way. There was grave danger then for Tom and Josephine as well as for the cattle. But an indomitable soul was Tom's. Still pushing the cattle

THE HOMESTEADERS

forward, he ran toward Josephine on the farther side. Too late! The ice had broken at last from the shore to the treacherous, boiling airhole, and all that mass of rotten ice between became a heaving, floating death trap. Many cattle had already scrambled in safety to the bank. Many were breaking in, and yet others slid into the water, unable to maintain a balance on the tippy blocks that broke off from the main strip. Most of these fortunate ones swam readily to shore; but of those which broke off on the farther side, many kept their footing and went floating down the narrow channel, their unsteady support knocking against the thin ice on the far side of the airhole. When these finally struck the solid ice below, they dived suddenly under, drawn by the terrible suction, and the luckless creatures thus unexpectedly brushed into the water had not room nor time to resist, and many a fine beef, signed with the sign of the opulent Seven-up, was thus drawn into the yawning, cruel trap of death.

It was well for Josephine, that day, that quickness in thought and unhesitancy in action were Tom's by right of birth as well as by the years of training in the struggle for the subjugation

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER.

of the arrogant cattle country. He was bounding to Josephine to force her out of the reach of danger when the crash came. And then it was that Josephine found herself unanchored on a jagged-edged piece of ice that tottered beneath the weight of herself and two lusty steers; but these two poor creatures slipped immediately into the seething water, so that her frail bark rode steadily and began its slow, stately, heart-clutching journey down the channel. Then this is what he did, that man of the plains. There might have been other ways of saving Josephine; perhaps none so sure, because it was his incomparable strength that made it possible. Afterwards it came to him that he might have let her drift, as the foolish cattle had drifted, to the solid ice below, and then called to her to jump before her block went under; but there might have been a mis-step, and there was no power on earth that could have saved her had her spring fallen short. Just a moment he stood, strong, reliant, weighing the chances. A swift, unformed thought of commendation flashed through his mind and then hid in his heart to find expression in another time. Josephine had not screamed nor made one rash or hysterical

THE HOMESTEADERS

movement. White-cheeked and quiet, she awaited his lead.

“Do not move!” he called to her, and ran swiftly to the shore, leaping the chasm where a dark flood pushed and eddied between. It would have been a long jump, even on an athletic field with the advantage of a run and without the hazard of teetering ice for the weight of his spring. As it was, he fell foul of the bank and went waist deep into the slacker water close in shore. He scrambled out, sprang up the bank, snatched his rope from his saddle horn, ran down the river, and out onto the unbroken ice below the ugly break-up.

Josephine was drawing perilously near the danger line when he roped her—roped her as he had roped hundreds of creatures of the range. Tom Burrington had not been one to stay in the cities while the stirring man’s work of the ranch was left to others, who in turn would reap the high reward of a true sight, a steady nerve, and a strong arm. No cow-puncher on the Seven-up could throw a better rope than its master. The noose settled swiftly under Josephine’s arms; there was a quick, sharp jerk, and he drew her

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

to him, out of the death trap, safe, but bruised by her crumpled flight over the ice, and shocked into momentary unconsciousness by the sudden contact with the cold water.

CHAPTER VI

AT THE RANCH HOUSE OF THE SEVEN-UP

TOM came in.

"I am very sorry," said Josephine, earnestly. "I wanted to be a help instead of a hindrance. I am very sorry."

She was sitting in a rocking-chair on a huge gray wolfskin close to the fire in the big living-room of the ranch house of the Seven-up. Tom, unaccountably embarrassed and fearful moreover of her taking cold as a result of her recent plunge, stirred the fire vigorously until it roared and crackled, and then stood near in order to feed it, which he did almost constantly from a supply of driftwood heaped high in a box behind the stove. Josephine had removed her dripping outer garments and was well wrapped in a gayly colored Indian blanket which her host had left for her. Her small stockinged feet were propped upon the fender, her shoes standing near by to dry. The pretty color was returning to her cheeks. In the kitchen Tom's cook was plainly visible, moving briskly about preparing a meal of night

AT THE RANCH HOUSE

for the Boss's tony, unexpected, but altogether welcome guests. Given an incentive, he really was a famous cook, and what better incentive than a girl — and such a girl — a girl so late from civilization that her notions were doubtless even yet colored with the pampered fancies of that far-away, mistaken people. He would show her once and for all what real cookery was. So he sang, as he mixed his biscuit dough, a song of sacred words, but profane melody — profane because he had a long time ago forgotten the meaning of what he sang.

“Are you sure that you are warm enough?” demanded Tom, irrelevantly.

“I am as warm as toast,” said Josephine. “You have made such a splendid fire, I shall be dry in no time. You are so — good. How can I ever — you were so quick and so strong.”

Someway, it was hard to say anything properly to this man. She had never before found any trouble in expressing herself easily and to the point. It annoyed her. If he would only sit down! He stood there looking down at her gravely, and he seemed very big and handsome while she herself felt chagrined, humbled, forlorn, and decidedly at a disadvantage with that

THE HOMESTEADERS

ridiculous blanket, her wild hair, and dilapidated appearance generally. It was n't fair.

"I am glad I was in time," he said, simply. "But I was sorry that I had to throw so soon. I think if I had had time to get nearer I might have saved you from a wetting."

Her vexation of the moment vanished immediately. She held out her hand impulsively, and as he held it for rather a long moment he did not think once of the dishevelled hair or of the bizarre effect of the gay blanket. What he did think was this: That the west country would be a very lonely country when this brown-eyed, sweet-voiced Josephine Carroll went away from it forever. Something came to him then—something that brought a hint of color into the bronzed face and a light into the gray eyes. He threw back his handsome head and laughed a little under his breath. He would do it—if he could.

"What did the wetting matter? What did anything matter?" said Josephine, gratefully. "Only that in a moment I should have been—it would have been too late—but in that moment you were there and now I am here safe and warm by the fire—it would be so dark under the ice and cold and—the water is running so fast."

AT THE RANCH HOUSE

She shuddered and was silent, the full horror of it all creeping over her for the first time since her rescue.

"You must not think of that," said Tom, quietly. "There was n't the slightest danger. I knew that I should be in time and I also knew that I should not miss. Why, Miss Carroll," he went on, lightly, "I want you to know that I know how to throw a rope. If you will just remember that one little fact, you will not be afraid the next time you go for a sail down Old Muddy on an ice boat."

Josephine smiled tremulously; then she asked soberly: "And the poor cattle—did many drown? Oh, the poor things!"

"Not many in proportion. The boys are filling out the required number now. Do not grieve about—them," he added, in a low voice.

At that moment a shrill cattle call was heard from without, and with the words, "That is Charlie, and judging from the racket, the boys have found the strays all right," Tom left the room.

It was a meal of might, to be sure. They ate in the same big room where Josephine had sat by the fire. She had put on her own clothes

THE HOMESTEADERS

again, but still felt a little wrinkled and "trembly." She tried hard, however, to keep her mind off the rushing water, and the men never spoke of it after the affair had been explained to Jack. His answer to Tom had been a strong, silent handclasp. There were half a dozen cowboys seated around the long tables besides Tom, Josephine, and Jack. It was an interesting room. Josephine was frankly curious about it and its furnishings. It was very plain to be seen that a woman had been there—that it had not always been inhabited by a careless set of bachelor cow-men alone. That rocking-chair, for instance, was of fine wicker, self-evidently a woman's chair. There were several flower pots on the south window sills, although any plant there might once have been was now but a dead and desolate stalk.

"We forgot to water them," explained Tom, with a laugh, when he saw Josephine's eyes resting upon these pathetic reminders of his carelessness. "I promised my mother that I would take care of them—and so did Charlie here. You need not grin so cheerfully, my boy, you know that you are as deeply involved in this affair as I am. My mother loves flowers, Miss Car-

AT THE RANCH HOUSE

roll, and more than that, I imagine that she thinks the boys need some refining influence about them. Not I, of course, but the boys. We are an ornery lot, I suspect. Anyway, she cunningly tries to enlighten our souls to a proper appreciation of the beautiful. I promised her when she went away that I would take care of her posies, but I forgot, and Charlie forgot; so they died."

"While you are about it you might as well tell why we're eatin' canned beans for dinner, too, stid o' spuds and ingerns," spoke up Charlie Moore, casually. He was busily engaged upon the consumption of a generous share of the beans in question, as he spoke.

"Please do," said Josephine, smiling.

"They froze."

"Oh! And how did it happen?"

"Will you not spare me the harrowing recital?" begged Tom, in joyous badinage.

"Tell me," insisted Josephine, gleefully.

"Well," said Tom, ruefully, "if I must, I must, I suppose. It was this way. You see I have a little brother. His name is Louis and he is eleven, I believe, and somewhat of a farmer, with mother putting him

THE HOMESTEADERS

up to it all the time. Louis had a garden down there on the bottom last Summer. The boys liked him and they all helped. We had fine watermelons in August, and good things all Summer long. When he went away, he left explicit instructions as to just when we must dig up the late potatoes and the onions; but we kind of forgot, and one morning the ground was frozen through a foot or more. It was a sad farewell, and this has been a long and dreary winter, potatoless and onionless."

"What shocking shiftlessness," laughed Josephine, merrily; "but you have suffered for it."

"Indeed, we have," responded Tom, soberly. "Do you know, I hated like the deuce—Miss Carroll, forgive me, I forgot—to own up to the little chap that I had forgotten to take care of his garden. He did so want the boys to have something good to eat during the long, monotonous Winter. Yes, that is the child's shelf there in the corner. He cannot always be carrying all of his things to and from Chicago, so he leaves part of them here. He persuaded one of the boys to put up that shelf in the living-room because he said it seemed a shame to lock up his treasures in his own room when 'You fellows

AT THE RANCH HOUSE

might as well be getting the good of 'em.' It is a strange jumble of school books and boy stories, marbles and baseball paraphernalia, which he brought with him, and odd stones, snake skins, wolf teeth, coyote skins, bits of mica and horns of defunct cattle, which he has gathered together here—and some of the things the Indians have given him. Most of those he took back with him to the city, however; things like the war bonnet, the moccasins, the medicine pouch, the barbed arrows, and the shield. They would make a vast impression on his mates, you will very readily understand. Yes, that is his own rifle. I am teaching him to use it. Poor chap! How he longed to take that with him to show the fellows, although he knew that he could never use it there. But the mother said, 'No.' ”

“And yet you could disappoint a child like that and forget his garden,” said Josephine, reproachfully.

“It was a shame, was n't it? But his revenge is at hand. We shall all have to reform and learn to farm whether we like it or not. It will soon be a question of our butter and bread. You homesteaders have invaded the land at last. I confess that I have always been surprised that you have

THE HOMESTEADERS

not done so before; but you have sounded the doom of the cattlemen all right. We shall either be compelled to turn grangers or else be 'a-movin' on,' as Henry said this morning."

Again the old question!

"One would think," interposed Jack, jestingly earnest, "that Josephine and I were not only monsters of iniquity, but a multitude of monsters — all hydra-headed. Now, Josephine and I are only two people and Josephine has but one head and I have but one. I pledge you my word of honor that this is true according to my own best belief and judgment."

They all laughed heartily, but Tom soon became grave.

"You are not the only ones," he said. "It is the beginning of the end. Carroll, do you intend to abide by your holding, no matter what the consequences may be, and in spite of hardships, discouragements, drought, and loneliness?"

He looked at the younger man keenly a moment. He wanted to know the make of Jack because upon him depended many things, chief of which was the question of the staying or going of Josephine.

AT THE RANCH HOUSE

"I do so intend," replied Jack, steadily.
"Through good or evil report—through prosperity or poverty—through happiness or sorrow—through trouble, pain, or death. All I ask is to be let alone. I had better be let alone. If I am not, there will be trouble—for some one."

CHAPTER VII

ONJIJITKA MAKES A DISCOVERY

THE river did break up early, the Spring was beautiful, and May time was Summer time in the cattle country. The hills were spotted far and wide with bunches of that uncompromisingly stiff plant with its many spear-shaped leaves, which the natives call soap-weed. Undulating barriers made of the broad-leaved, prickly cactus that runs along the ground sprang up everywhere. Josephine had worn her heavy leathern leggings in the Winter for warmth. She continued to wear them now with thick-soled shoes as a protection against surprise from some torpid rattler which might any day now be coming out to stretch himself after his long sleep, and to bask in the warm sun of this early Summer. A colony of prairie dogs had settled a short distance northwest of the Broken Key, and the little fellows chattered and squealed and dived in and out of their underground homes all the live-long day. Slabs of mica, oftentimes in layers as thin and smooth as if sliced with a knife, glinted from the

A DISCOVERY

cut bluffs opposite, or, catching the sun, glittered on the narrow slate gravel below where they had slid from some upper stratum. The cedars in the gap and in the gulches had changed their rusty brown to a cleaner, richer green. The wild, stormy winds of Spring had settled down into the steady monotones of Summer breezes which went whispering through the grass and talked in mysteries to the tree-tops. Under the spell of it all, the ceaseless winds, the immutable hills, the solemn solitude, the haughty rush of the big yellow river to join the southern sea, Josephine forgot the longing for the land of her fathers which had stalked beside her all through the dreary Winter months, and the home of the South became a sweet haunting memory of something that had passed away forever.

On one of these May afternoons when the wind blew strongly over the high table lands and grieved in the gulches, Onjijitka, returning from Velpen, rode down through the gap and sent a shrill, penetrating, but sweet halloo into the face of the wind across the white-capped water. Then, slipping from her pony, she stood leaning against him, motionless, waiting. Presently a boat pushed out from the island and began its

THE HOMESTEADERS

wavering, uncertain course towards her. It was a huge, ungainly looking object not unlike a crudely built row-boat, except for its unusual size. There was one large oar near the front requiring the rigid attention and constant labor of two men, not so much to propel as to keep the boat at the proper angle with the current, the current forcing it forward somewhat in the manner in which the wind forces a sailboat when the boat is riding at right angles with it. When with a soft, sliding sound, the ferry grounded on the yielding sand of the near shore, one of the men sprang out and secured it by throwing the noose of a heavy rope over a stake driven into the earth, some little distance up the road. Then the second man stepped slouchily ashore.

"So it's you, Rosebud," said the latter, gnawing off a piece of villainous-looking plug tobacco as he spoke. "You could n't have waited, I suppose, until this cursed wind went down?"

"No, I could n't," said Rosebud, calmly, leading her pony to the water's edge.

"Oh, you could n't, could n't you?" retorted LaDue, his ready anger rising to meet the cool insolence of the tone. "Well, young lady, the chances are pretty much in favor of you waitin',

A DISCOVERY

whether it suits you or not. Just don't you cast off yet, Henry. Wind's too blamed strong for this here boat to push against. We'll just wait a while, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind in the least," said Rosebud, indifferently. "Now that you have come, I should n't care if we remained here until moon-up, for that matter."

"Supposin' Henry and I should scoot back with the boat, not hankerin' perticular to overload 'er with you and your critter, what would you do then, eh?"

"I should shoot the old tub full of holes so that she would sink with you," responded Rosebud, composedly.

"Do you carry a gun, girl?" asked LaDue, curiously. "I don't see none."

"Put me to the test and then you will know," said Rosebud, quietly.

"The girl's got the drop on you, LaDue," called Henry Hoffman, good-naturedly, from the stake. "Quit your foolin' and git that there cayuse into the boat if you're kakilatin' on any he'p from me."

"That's what you get by caterin' to a she-Injun," said LaDue, grumblingly.

THE HOMESTEADERS

"I think, perhaps, you had better not call me that any more," said Rosebud, softly.

"Call you what?"

"'She-Injun.' You had better not, I think."

Her voice was low, emotionless. Her soft dark eyes were not upon him at all but were fixed dreamily upon the long, green timber line of the mainland opposite. It looked farther away than it really was, somehow, with the wind blowing from it and the whitecaps riding between. La-Due laughed loudly.

"Why, God A'mighty, girl," he cried, "but you're puttin' on a lot o' airs, now, ain't you? What's come over you all o' a sudden? Tell me that, now, and then we'll go. I ain't got no intentions o' campin' out here all Summer, if you have. What's come over you, Rosebud? You ain't contemplatin' leavin' your relations again, are you?" He glanced at her keenly from suddenly narrowed eyes.

"Never mind about that," said Rosebud, almost listlessly. "But you had better remember what I said about calling names."

Leading her pony, she stepped into the boat where, there being no deck, the gritty little fellow was compelled to stand, steadying himself on the

A DISCOVERY

narrow flat bottom. The horse disposed of to her satisfaction, she turned her back upon the men, nor would she be drawn into further conversation. At a sign from LaDue, Henry cast off, both men sprang on board, and the rude little ferry began its slow, tortuous way back against the wind. Without a doubt it would drift below its original moorings. Rosebud, unafraid, dreamed day-dreams. The men plied the big oar untiringly, Henry Hoffman interestedly. He had never seen anything just like it until he had hired out to Frank LaDue for a season's chopping of wood. There was nothing to be heard but the sweep of the Summer wind over the boat and the swish of the tawny water slapping against the rough planking.

Presently the men began talking in a desultory fashion. Their voices were not distinct but Rosebud was not interested. She did not like LaDue and she felt no curiosity concerning the new man on the island. Men came and went there, giving place to a new man so quickly that it was scarcely worth while to be curious about them. A man would drift one day to the island. No one knew whence he came. No one asked. He would cut wood for a while, haul it some-

THE HOMESTEADERS

times to ranchmen off the river front who had no timber, thus identifying himself for the time being with the interests of the owner of the island. After a while he would not be there any more. There would be a new man doing the same old things. What was the use of being curious? So Rosebud did not listen.

It was not long, however, before a little hissing sound was borne to her ears, a sound akin to the warning of a rattle-snake. It was not a rattle-snake's warning, and Rosebud never for one moment thought that it was. She knew perfectly well what it was, and it was because she knew so well that she seemed not to hear at all. She continued staring idly across the turbulent water. Her Indian blood helped her. And yet what she had heard was only a faint "Sh—she—h—h—," half whispered by one of the men. There is nothing so penetrating as a sibilant whisper. It is very probable that had not that hissing caution been given, she would have comprehended nothing of the low-toned conversation; but now that something was being said that she must not hear, she would hear—if she had to stifle her own breath which hindered her. They were not saying much—a word now and then—she could

A DISCOVERY

not hear — what was that — “the kid’s critter — swim ’er across — this evening — pocket —”

Rosebud rode slowly and unconcernedly across the island and stopped at the Broken Key.

“I am going to stay for supper, Josephine,” she announced, calmly.

Jack was not at home.

“It is strange that you did not meet him,” said Josephine. “He went to town right after dinner. We are sadly in need of help, Rosebud. Why, bless you, I have turned herd boy. Did n’t you know that? I take care of the cattle while Jack farms. The house just takes care of itself. It looks dreadful, I know. But what is a body going to do when she has fifty poor creatures to minister unto? I cannot let them starve. I wish we had kept that baby-eyed cowboy who works for our neighbor. But we did not realize when we let him go in March how much extra work the farming would make. He said that he would rather take care of cattle than chop wood. Still, I notice that he is everlastingly at it — chopping wood, I mean. It is strange that you did not meet Jack, Rosebud.”

An inscrutable smile came into Rosebud’s dark eyes. She had not met Jack but she had seen

THE HOMESTEADERS

him. She had not met him because—well—because—and he had not seen her because she had not meant that he should see her. She thought to herself, a little sadly, that Josephine need not be troubled about her home. In Rosebud's eyes, it looked neat and sweet and home-like. Bowls of wood violets stood on the rude table. White Swiss curtains hung at the windows. It was true that books, papers, and magazines were strewn rather carelessly about, but what did it matter? The room looked like Josephine and it looked like—Jack.

When Rosebud was gone, Josephine sat down on the door step to wait for Jack. The wind had fallen away. It was very still. The sun went down and a coolness crept in its wake. There was a thick growth of willows between her and the river but it seemed to her that she could feel it rushing southward. She wished that Jack would come. The evening was such a lonesome time when he was away. She was afraid that she might get to thinking—thinking of a better day for them, when Jack was never long gone and when she never had to be alone. The evenings here in the valley were so still. It was getting dark. There would be a moon, though, so she

A DISCOVERY

should not be afraid. She wondered what they were doing on the island. They were not cutting late to-night. From far away came faintly the sound of a coyote's shrill bark, then another and another, mellowed by distance. The far-away yelping continued, making the near stillness stiller and the lonesomeness more lonesome. A big timber wolf was visible for a moment skulking along the sky line of the western hills—then it, too, was gone. An owl hooted, and at that moment Rosebud came back. She was on foot and she glided noiselessly around the house like a phantom of the lonely night.

“Josephine,” she whispered, holding out her hand, “come with me and quickly!”

“What—where—” began Josephine, startled and bewildered. She arose and grasped Rosebud's hand, chilled with sudden apprehension and glad, glad, of the friendly human touch.

“Do not be afraid—just come with me and quickly. I did not go home—I followed them. That man LaDue is a—devil, Josephine.” She was dragging Josephine toward the dark blur of the island forest while these breathless words came in choking undertones from her lips. “He will run in Indian calves from the Reserva-

THE HOMESTEADERS

tion, will he? Let him watch out. Now and from henceforth I, Onjijitka, am camping on his trail. You know that he does that, don't you, Josephine—runs in our calves and hides them here on the island until he can dispose of them? He has not yet been caught in the act but we know—Two Hawks knows and Bear Heart—let him beware of Bear Heart—Bear Heart never forgets and his hate is relentless and his vengeance sure. The agent knows, I think. They know it at the Seven-up. Many know it who are afraid. Afraid, Josephine, do you hear? But Onjijitka is not afraid. Let him look out. Josephine, have you lost a cow?"

"Yes," whispered Josephine, starting nervously away from a fallen tree trunk.

"You must not be afraid," said Rosebud, reassuringly. "They are both at the river by this time. There is no one else on the island. You are sure about the heifer?"

"Yes," assented Josephine, trying desperately to control the numb terror that was creeping over her. "She has been missing for two days."

"Would you know the stray?"

"Yes. She is the cow we always milked."

"We must not talk any more now," said Rose-

A DISCOVERY

bud, in a low voice. "Do not say a word. Just follow me."

They turned aside from the dim wagon trail into the dark woods to the north. There was no light in the cabin but they gave it a wide berth, nevertheless, and were soon safely lost in the labyrinth of the forest. Presently, they turned eastward and crept noiselessly forward until they came to the end of the timber. There they halted. If they remained quiet there was little danger of discovery. The shadows were very deep. The moon, riding up from the eastern hills, served only to make them the denser by contrast. The usually murky water gleamed silver in the white radiance. The river was low and a sandy beach stretched between the timber line and the water's edge where a skiff swung lightly at its moorings. There was no sign of man or beast in all the peaceful scene. They had not long to wait. Very soon, two men and a cow emerged from out the gloom of the forest so close to them that Josephine with difficulty refrained from gasping aloud in sheer nervous dread, and walked leisurely across the sandbar. Josephine pressed Rosebud's hand convulsively and Rosebud understood. The men were plainly

THE HOMESTEADERS

visible — their identity easily determined. They approached the boat wordlessly. They were not afraid. This was a very lonely spot. They were silent merely because there was no necessity for speech. They understood one another so absolutely — Frank LaDue and his woodchopper. They stepped into the boat and pushed off, but the cow evinced signs of stubbornness, planted her feet firmly in the sand and refused to be dragged into the water, so that the leading rope became taut and strained, all to no purpose. Immediately, the men broke forth into profanity which had no effect, seemingly, upon the cow. The controversy between man and brute was finally adjusted, to the satisfaction of the men at least, by Henry Hoffman's jumping from the boat and shoving the animal into the river, using an oar for a club. Then he himself ran into the water, climbed into the rapidly receding skiff, and the two men rowed across the moonlit water and into the heavy shadows beyond, the cow swimming gallantly in their wake.

"And he said, Josephine," whispered Rosebud, as the girls made their way homeward, back through the dark, island forest — there was no need of whispering now, but it went with the

A DISCOVERY

erie errand upon which they had been bent — “he said — I followed them, you know — ah! he little dreamed that the ‘she-Injun’ was so near. He had better not call me names any more, Josephine, and he had better, far better, stay off the Indian lands.” Her voice was low and hissing, but beautiful still. It would always be beautiful. She had forgotten what she meant to say. They came out into the dim trail where the moonlight filtered through the foliage overhead; then she remembered. “He said, Josephine, ‘I’ll get every critter Carroll owns if he does n’t get out o’ here mighty damned quick!’”

With a sinking heart, Josephine recalled Jack’s words the day at the Seven-up. “All I ask is to be let alone,” he had said. “I had better be let alone. If I am not, there will be trouble for some one.”

CHAPTER VIII

CARROLL CALLS ON HIS NEIGHBOR

IT was late when Jack came home. He found Josephine and Rosebud still sitting on the door step. Rosebud arose at once.

"Josephine and I will ride home with you," said Jack.

"Indeed you shall not," returned Rosebud, resolutely. "It is too far. I stayed with Josephine because—she will tell you why. I am going home alone."

"Rosebud, stay all night," urged Josephine. "It is so late."

"The night is not bad to me," answered Rosebud. "You must not forget that every turn of the old trail, every bunch of soapweed by the wayside, is known to Onjijitka. Night or day, it is all the same. Good-night."

"Onjijitka," said Jack, with whimsical reproach and with a gallant and reckless disregard of the many miles that lay between the Broken Key and the outlying hut on the Reservation—he had a little way of hesitating for a barely per-

A C A L L

ceptible moment before pronouncing her name in the slow, lovable voice that was becoming so dangerously sweet to the step-daughter of Two Hawks—"do you mean to say that you are not going to let me ride home with you?"

"Onjijitka has said. Good-night." She glided into the shadows and was gone.

"Heigho!" yawned Jack, throwing himself down upon the spot where Rosebud had been sitting. "I'm tired, Jo, dead tired." It was true. His face showed pale and tired in the moonlight. "I think perhaps I have found some one to help us after a while—in a few days—but it was hard, tremendously hard. I think the Broken Key is out of favor, Josephine. Heigho, but I am tired!" He clasped his hands behind his head and rested so, leaning against the door casing, his brown eyes staring thoughtfully into the shadows. "What a pretty girl Onjijitka is," he said dreamily.

"She is indeed," assented Josephine, quietly. "Jack, I have something to tell you."

Early the next morning Jack sauntered over to the island. Because the river was low, he walked dry-shod across the slough. The log cabin was deserted. The door was standing open

THE HOMESTEADERS

but there was no one within. The breakfast dishes stood unwashed upon the table. They consisted of two tin cups, two tin plates, a like number of tin spoons and blackened steel knives and forks, with an immense frying pan holding the place of honor in the centre. It had evidently served the double purpose of having the bacon first cooked and then served therein. The odor of the fried meat still clung to the close air of the low-ceilinged room. Should he wait? Surely some one would return presently to straighten the untidy room. The sleeping bunks were even unmade. Yes, he would wait a bit—not inside—he would walk up and down in the sweet outdoor air of the early morning. He was hurt and angry. He had entered into the pioneer life beyond the big river simply, whole-heartedly, fearlessly, unsuspectingly. Suddenly and without warning he had been struck in the dark. It was a rude awakening.

The sun climbed higher. The plains country winds could not penetrate to the little clearing in the heart of the woods so that here it was very warm and still, with the sun creeping insidiously through the thickening tree-tops. Presently from up stream, as he waited, came a familiar

A CALL

sound, and soon the quiet, almost oppressive air was ringing with the monotonous repetition of blows from an axe in the hands of the wood-cutter. The day's work had begun. The probabilities were that there would be no returning to the house now until noon time. It seemed strange. It was not the way of the men of the West who kept house for themselves to leave until the primitive bachelor arrangements were as tidily disposed of as it was possible for them to be under the circumstances. It came to Jack, standing there pondering the unusualness of the early desertion, that it was a premeditated getting away. Perhaps he had been seen crossing the slough and perhaps he was not accounted a welcome guest. Well, he should follow his neighbor to the wood-chopping. He had come to see him and he meant to see him.

He found LaDue up in the northern boundaries of the island, alone, cutting up a gigantic cottonwood that had been felled a few days before. The man ceased his labors, leaned his axe against a tree, and wiped his streaming face with a much soiled handkerchief.

"Oh, it's you," he said, indifferently.

"Yes," said Jack. "I stopped at the house,

THE HOMESTEADERS

but finding no one there, I came here. I heard the sound of your axe."

"Was n't Henry to the house?"

"I did not see him."

"He must have been 'round some 'ers. Fine day."

"It is, indeed. I came over to see you, Mr. LaDue, about a little matter of business that I am sure you will be able to explain satisfactorily," began Jack. He paused a moment.

"Well, spit 'er out. I got a lot o' work to do to-day, sonny," responded LaDue, with suggestive impatience.

"All right," said Jack, quietly, although the hot, impulsive blood burned in his face and tingled at his finger tips so that he longed to knock his neighbor down. "I shall not keep you long. Briefly, then, this is the way of it. Last night, my sister saw you and your man cross one of the Broken Key milch cows to the other side. The animal has been missing for two or three days. Now, I know how easy it is, Mr. LaDue," continued Jack, diplomatically, "to mistake cattle when they run at large, and it was after night, too, when you crossed this one. Mine have been feeding right here, near home, and I know

A CALL

that many of them stray over to the island. But we have decided to let them feed north of the big gulch again so that there need be no more trouble. Is it not so?"

LaDue's face was convulsed with a great rage. His narrow eyes gleamed malignantly from beneath his heavy brows. His black, bristly, seven-days' beard gave him a peculiarly unkempt appearance, as his house had looked when he left it.

"Now, you look here, young feller," he said, "you'll do well to mind your own business. Don't you know that yet? If you don't, you'll do a'mighty well to learn. This ain't a meddlin' country and we have a pretty good way o' teaching fool tenderfeet who don't know their place nor their business—well, if we don't exactly teach 'em their business, we have a first-rate way o' showin' 'em pretty plain what ain't their business. Takin' that in? Well, I did cross a cow last night—my own critter she was—and Henry drove her to the rest o' the bunch in the hills. Now, then, is that explanation enough for you? You wouldn't have got the half from Frank LaDue if you weren't my neighbor."

THE HOMESTEADERS

He reached for his axe as if the subject and the call as well were both at an end.

“Wait a minute,” said Jack, firmly. “That is not explanation enough. I had hoped that we might settle this—this disagreement amicably and I still hope that you will see the wisdom of not letting this affair go any farther and will agree to end it right here and now peacefully and with no one the wiser. Onjijitka—”

“Thievin’, lyin’ Sioux!” muttered LaDue, with a scornful shrug of his shoulders.

For a moment, it seemed as if Jack would spring at the man’s throat and throttle him, so enraged was he at the brutal remark, but he controlled himself.

“Onjijitka,” he continued, steadily, “my sister’s very dear friend—and mine—overheard, yesterday, your arrangements with Henry Hoffman on the boat to ‘cross Carroll’s critter’ when the wind went down. After supper, she followed you to the place where you had concealed the animal. She heard you say, LaDue, that you meant to have all of my stock if I stayed here. That was not very neighborly, now, was it? Why you should desire my removal from the country so heartily at the same time that you

A CALL

plan to make a good thing out of my poor little herd is more than I can comprehend," he concluded, a little wistfully.

LaDue's anger had seemingly passed away during this brief recital and he was now unconcernedly rolling a cigarette. He sat down upon the fallen log as if he had changed his mind about being in a hurry and reached for a wide chip which he whittled idly. Instantly, Jack became stern again.

"But if you think to force me out of the way by such means, I tell you now, LaDue, frankly, that you might as well spare yourself any further trouble, for I will never go. Do you hear? I will never go—alive." He paused a moment, then continued: "So Onjijitka went back and told my sister and they made your rendezvous, too, together, only they kept back in the timber and they saw—all that there was to see. The moon was very bright, you will remember."

LaDue waited until he had whittled away the last splinter in his chip and had begun on another; then he said, tolerantly:

"You never can believe Injuns, Carroll. They're the biggest liars and thieves in the world and half-breeds are the worst o' all. You ain't

THE HOMESTEADERS

learned much if you ain't learned that yet. No one in this here country'll trust a half-breed out o' his sight. Anybody's cattle is their cattle. That squaw was just makin' trouble. She may have your critter herself for all I know, or else that thievin' ol' renegade of a Two Hawks. He does n't make no pretensions o' livin' on anything but 'slowelk.' If you'd have told me in the first place that this squaw critter had been stuffin' you, I would n't have been so all-fired mad as I was, because I know Injuns. I killed a Injun once for rustlin' one o' my critters," he concluded, casually.

"Shall we leave Onjijitka out of the question for the present?" said Jack, with cold authority. "Miss Carroll saw the cow and knew it for our own. That is enough, I think. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"Aho! So that's the way the wind blows, is it?" said LaDue, with a disagreeable chuckle. "I was askin' her only yesterday why she was puttin' on so many airs."

"I asked you," said Jack, now white with passion, "what are you going to do about it?"

"And I answer you," replied LaDue, "not a damned thing!"

A CALL

"If you do not deliver that cow to me before noon on the day after to-morrow, I shall make you sweat for it," said Jack, deliberately.

"Do! Go ahead!" taunted LaDue. "I defy you! Prove that was not my cow, will you? How are you goin' to do it? Tell me that, now!"

"You know very well how I shall prove it. I mean what I say. I understand perfectly, now, that little calf deal. And you dared to insinuate that I rustled that calf from you! That incident may not be closed after all. But leaving the calf altogether out of the question, I shall prosecute you just as surely as the cow is not returned to me by noon of the day after to-morrow. I give you until then because to-morrow we shall be at Lower Brule for the games. We go as far as Velpen to-night. I trust that you understand me thoroughly?"

The islander's passion was something terrible to see.

"You—you—upstart," he choked, "do you think for a moment that there won't be a way found for plasterin' your damned mouth before you have a chance to regale the officers with your pack o' petticoat lies? A pretty sort o' woman your sister must be to go spyin' 'round

THE HOMESTEADERS

on the doin's o' men. How could she tell whose blamed cow that was, and at night? It was a sorry day for her when she strayed away from her own and took to herdin' with this bunch west o' the river. A sorry day and you can tell her so for me. Now, then, young man, what are *you* goin' to do about it?"

"I have told you," said Jack, quietly. "You have until the day after to-morrow."

He nodded curtly, turned, and strode quickly homeward.

Left alone, LaDue fingered, restlessly, something that lay in a heavy holster at his hip. There was an ugly look in his eyes.

"Why did n't you?" asked Henry Hoffman, lounging into view with the oars of the skiff over his big shoulders. There was a quizzical look in his blue eyes as he spoke.

"I did n't want to freeze you out of the game, Henry," said LaDue, calmly, reaching for his axe.

CHAPTER IX

UP THE MISSOURI

THE Wild West celebration to which Jack referred was not to be a tawdry imitation of, nor a burlesque on the peculiarities and environments of range life. It was to be a real, active, though friendly rivalry between real cowboys, with real, well-earned records to make or break and with real brands to represent, brands that were carried by thousands of animals and were known far and wide over the range country. This competitive trial of skill was to be held at Lower Brule Agency for two reasons. First, because the Indians were interested, but chiefly because it was neutral ground for the cowmen of the Bad River country and those of the south, accounting the Agency the dividing line. Between these two sections was a friendly feud of long-standing rivalry and the coming contest had been planned to settle some old scores, to decide some disputed points, and above all, to interrupt, however briefly, the unruffled monotony of the daily life of the cowboy pioneer.

With Jack and Josephine Carroll, when they

THE HOMESTEADERS

rode into Velpen the evening before the day of the games, were Tom Burrington, of the Seven-up, his mother and young brother Louis, but lately out from Chicago, the boy driving his mother in the buggy while Tom rode his favorite mount, a blooded animal but a famous cow horse none the less; Rosebud and her step-brother, Bear Heart, son of Two Hawks, of the Rosebud Indian Reservation. Bear Heart was a full-blooded, square-shouldered Sioux, who held as sacred the traditions of the past; who dreamed of a rehabilitated freedom and glory for his people, and who had promptly rejected the proffered advantages of civilization by running away from Carlisle, whither Two Hawks, at the earnest solicitation of Rosebud, warmly seconded by the Missionary Bishop, had sent him in a moment of unguarded and listless indifference. Bear Heart had stoically refused to go back and Two Hawks had not insisted.

The little party went straight to the hotel. There seemed to be an unusual number of men hanging around the lobby. Many left the room upon the arrival of the new guests, three of whom were ladies, but they did not go far. They collected in small groups outside, not talking

UP THE MISSOURI

much, but a plainly discernible air of expectancy pervaded each and every one as if something of supreme interest was booked to happen before long and no one wished to be very far off when the entry was called. While Jack registered for the party, Tom stepped out to give orders for the care of their horses. Upon re-entering the room, he was casually approached by a prominent merchant of the town in company with a neighbor from the White River country. Talking ceased all at once among the smokers who had elected to remain. The women had gone upstairs.

"Hello, Burrington," greeted the man from White River.

"Why, hello, Symes. So you are frittering away good time, too, are you, going up to watch those fool boys play monkey shines? We ought by rights to be in better business. Are you going up on the boat?"

"Nope. Not me. I got to feel leather between my knees when I 'm travellin' or I ain't comfortable. Mr. Budlong, here, and the whole Velpen aggregation are goin' up that way, though. I suppose you are, too, seein's you've got your women folks with you."

THE HOMESTEADERS

"Yes, we are going to take it easy this time. Who are entering from down our way, Symes? I have been too blamed busy to keep posted. What is going to happen?"

"Oh, the usual things—horse racing and bronc' busting and such child's play. Of course you're goin' in for the ropin' contest, ain't you, Burrington?"

There was a faint suggestion of anxiety in the matter-of-fact question. Jack sauntered over to the group, his hands in his pockets, waiting for the women to come down to go into the dining-room for a late supper.

"Not this time," said Tom, carelessly. "I am all out of practice. It is too hard work, anyway. I am getting lazy."

He turned at the sound of a step on the stair. It was only Louis, ill-content unless within sound of his big, gray-eyed hero's voice. He perched himself on the middle stair and prepared to listen to what was going on while still obeying his mother's request that he wait for her and Josephine and Rosebud.

"But, Mr. Burrington," interposed Budlong, anxiously, "we have counted on you all the time. The boys are all agreed. Velpen is betting

UP THE MISSOURI

heavily on you. Why, you must enter. We simply cannot get along without you."

"It seems to me that I have something to say in this matter," said Tom, with a laugh, "and so I say that the boys had better call their bets off. I am not going in. I never thought about it seriously and—I'd rather not."

The men who had vacated the room but a little while ago now began filing slowly back again. They were impatient for the result of the plainly premeditated interview.

"But it's this way, Tom," urged Symes. "The Pierre fellows are coming down, whole droves strong. There's a regular stampede of 'em, and they're makin' a lot o' talk about a wonder they've got up there. They're braggin' there ain't ary a man in the State can beat 'im—and we are bound to call that bluff. We're all agreed on you. There ain't nobody else we can dare trust agin' that there miracle fellow they're blowin' so much about. He's a new one. I never heard o' him before. More'n likely he ain't so much, after all, but we can't afford to run no risks. For the honor o' old Kemah, we've got to stop the big talk o' those fellows up north. Ain't that so?"

THE HOMESTEADERS

"Well, but see here, boys," said Tom, including in his response the entire group, who by this time had frankly surrounded him, ready to lend their persuasive powers, if necessary, in order to win their point, "I feel the honor and all that—you know that, don't you?—it is mighty good of you boys to—to—well, to think that I could do it—" he was visibly embarrassed, for Josephine had at last appeared around the bend in the stairway and was standing quietly behind Louis, waiting—"I appreciate your high rating of me—it is really downright good of you—but that is one reason why I hesitate. In fact, I cannot do it, boys. I should only disappoint you. I should stand no more show of winning than a jack-rabbit. That's honest. I am all out of practice. I have not half thrown a rope in ages and I do not know when I have made a tie. I should like to accommodate you—but I can't do it. I should lose for you and that I should hate like the dev—deuce. Get some one of whom you can be sure. I am all out of training and I cannot do it."

"You're the only one we are sure of, Tom, and that's why you've got to enter. You don't need no practice. You'll git there anyway.

UP THE MISSOURI

You always do. There ain't a man west o' the river can throw a rope like you—you know that, Tom—practice or no practice."

"Let me see," said Tom, meditatively, "who can we get to fight for our honor? There is Henry Hoffman. I can vouch for him. He used to outride for me. He was the best hand with a rope I ever saw. I think he works for Frank LaDue now. Why don't you get him? He comes from the Southwest and that is a recommendation in itself."

"No woodchoppers for us," said a cow-puncher on the outskirts, with a disdainful shrug of his shoulders. "Thirty-seven seconds 'd make him look purty sick, I'm thinkin'."

"A fellow that's been haulin' wood since March," said Symes, argumentatively, "is more'n likely somewhat out o' practice, too."

"But I can't take my horse on the boat," pleaded Tom, "and I am not alone, you know. I am with a party. I can't leave them."

"We'll see to it that that wall-eyed cayuse of yours is on the boat," returned Symes, promptly. "Waitly'll take him if we boys insist. Well, we insist—so that's a go."

"Have you any further objections to put

THE HOMESTEADERS

forth?" asked Budlong, with an appreciative smile at the inexhaustibility of Symes's arguments and the readiness with which he marshalled them forth to meet any and all objections.

"I cannot think of any more now," laughed Tom, helplessly. "But I am afraid that you will be sorry. I will do the best I can—you know that, don't you? But I tell you now that I can never make it in thirty-seven seconds. If that 'miracle fellow' can—well, remember that I warned you."

"Then that's settled," said Symes, with a sigh of relief, and the crowd dispersed with noisy self-congratulations upon the successful installation of their unanimous choice of a champion.

The *Susie*, temporarily out of commission as a ferryboat, left her wharf promptly at five o'clock on the morning of the big day of the sports. No delay would be tolerated by her impatient patrons, for the programme of events was scheduled to open immediately after the early twelve o'clock dinner and, counting on her best time and that no obstacles would be encountered, such as becoming annoyingly and indefinitely stranded upon a sand-bar, the boat could not possibly make the distance short of eleven. The early morning air

UP THE MISSOURI

was soft and cool and still. The fussy little gasoline boat ploughed her way right gallantly up the yellow, turbulent channel, wisely keeping close in shore whenever feasible in order to follow the line of least resistance.

"I am so glad that you consented to uphold our standard," said Josephine, smilingly. "I was afraid that you were going to refuse right out of hand, and then whatever should we have done?"

They had obtained seats on the west side of the engine house, all the party from the Seven-up, the Broken Key, and the Reservation, so as to be well out of the way of the late May sun when he should have warmed up to the work of the day. The rude camp stools of the women were propped against the outer wall to afford support for feminine backs, but Tom and Jack stood in front of them leaning carelessly against the railing, while the moody Indian, heedless of sun and disdaining the continued companionship of the loquacious whites, soon wandered forward and sat down upon the huge coil of rope that would later secure the boat to the landing at the Agency, and gazed silently, impassively, at the panorama of bluff and gulch and mouth of creek, the glint

THE HOMESTEADERS

of sun-struck mica and the dazzle of the white chalk rock with its corrugated surface where the rains and melted snows of centuries had worn their way to the river below, leaving innumerable little crinkles in their wake to bear witness to the constant erosion that had carved and scarred the rugged face of the bluffs of the Big Muddy. Louis neither sat nor stood; he was everywhere.

"It is all foolishness," responded Tom, soberly. Besides the disappointment that he feared he must inflict upon his friends, he had suddenly developed an intense aversion to making a show of himself before this gentle-mannered, high-bred girl from the Old South, he who had so often played the game with joyous zest. He was whittling away at a diamond willow which he had seized when, to avoid a huge, floating log, the boat had veered in close to the shore. "I shall only disappoint the boys. I know my limitations. I should not be afraid to try if I were in training, but as it is—"

"I am like the boys," said Josephine, gayly. "I have no fear. We have builded our faith on a rock," she added, slowly, with just a perceptible darkening of the frank eyes. "I do not forget, you see, when I, even I, came under your

UP THE MISSOURI

all-conquering noose. Any one capable of roping a hysterical girl, teetering down stream on a bit of crazy ice, need surely have no uneasiness about a clumsy quadruped."

"Ah, but you did not time me, Miss Carroll," retorted Tom. "I was doubtless an hour at it; and moreover, I object to that term 'hysterical.' I am here to testify that you never made a sound. You neither screamed nor cried nor moaned. You were pretty white, I confess, but you were — very brave."

"Paralyzed," said Josephine, banteringly, "or posing, maybe, for your lordship's approval."

"That being the case, I admire your superb self-control more than ever," said Tom, with a laugh of unbelief.

"Do not talk about it, children," interrupted Mrs. Burrington. "It positively makes me shudder just to think about it. Do talk about something pleasant."

But before the subject was shifted, Josephine flashed him a tiny smile as she said, softly, "Remember, your friends have perfect faith in you," and Tom bowed his handsome head in grave acknowledgment and wished that he might fairly justify her confidence, on the field, but in his

THE HOMESTEADERS

heart he was dubious of what the close of the afternoon should bring forth.

"I say, Tom," panted Louis, coming up at that moment in great haste, his blue eyes snapping with excitement and scorn, his chubby face hot and moist from too long a stay on the sunny side, "he says you are going to get beat all to nothing. I heard him telling somebody that you were too stuck up for this country, anyway, but that you would get your medicine this afternoon."

"Hold on there, lad," interrupted Tom, good-naturedly, tossing his willow into the current, catching up the small boy and elevating him to a position on the railing, where he held him firmly. "Who says what? Slow and easy now."

"Why, Frank LaDue, of course. He's talking over there with some fellows and he said that Pierre man was the best ever. He said he had every record in cattledom beat. Now, what do you think of that?"

He slipped away from Tom's grasp and balanced himself dexterously without holding on to the railing, while the big brother who loved him eyed him sharply, but made no move to lay hold of him again, in spite of the mother's protests.

"He said he hoped you would get beat even if

UP THE MISSOURI

you did belong to his diggings—it would serve you plumb right—that you were altogether too smart and were a little too blamed sure that you were the biggest frog in the puddle. You are, too, Tom, and that's the joke of it. Well, mother, you need n't frown at 'blamed.' I made that over for your special benefit. He said 'damned,' and worser ones, too, before he was through. His dictionary is n't like ours," he went on, airily and slangily, "but of its kind, it is surely a dandy. He said you strutted around like God Almighty—well, mother, he did. I'm just quoting, and quoting is n't swearing, is it? Now what do you think of that? I snickered right out. I could n't help it. He had n't seen me before and oh, gee! did n't he look mad, though? But he said he hoped you would hear what he'd said—it might do you some good. And he'd have spit tobacco on me, careless-like, if I had n't been too quick for him. Old snake-in-the-grass! When he got up he said something kind of under his breath about your 'Colloguin' with tattlers and interlopers and land-grabbers.' 'Colloguin' is n't in my dictionary," he concluded ingenuously, but no one helped him to a better understanding.

THE HOMESTEADERS

Jack's smooth, boyish face hardened, Josephine's became wistful, while Rosebud tapped the floor with her moccasined right foot, nervously. Tom alone seemed unmoved, but Mrs. Burrington, who knew him best, perceived that his keen but usually laughing eyes had narrowed ever so slightly, which was a bad sign.

"To me, that has an ugly ring," said Jack. "Look out for foul play, Tom."

"If there is going to be any trickery," said Mrs. Burrington, imploringly, "for goodness' sake, Tom, keep out of it. You said that you would not go in. Don't have anything to do with the wretched affair. It is a constant wonder to me why I will come back to this uncanny country. Every Summer, I make up my mind firmly that it shall be my last and yet here I am again, silly old woman that I am, to whom gray hairs have brought no corresponding sense. A nice situation this, for an old woman and a babe!"

"Babe! I don't see any babe," exploded Louis, fearful for his dignity when he was so soon to be a man of affairs in the cattle country—like Tom. "And, Tom, I'd beat or bust now if I were you. Me and Bear Heart'll watch out for foul play, won't we, old fellow?" he con-

UP THE MISSOURI

cluded, appealing to his good friend, the Indian, who had left his position on the coil of rope and sauntered forward.

The Indian nodded gravely.

"Bear Heart and the little brother will watch," he said unemotionally.

"What a tempest in a tea-pot, to quote you, mother," said Tom, laughing heartily. "There will be no trickery. Our friend dislikes me so thoroughly that he has pinned his faith to this wise man who has come out of the North. That is all. It is easy to prophesy catastrophe for those you hate. Trickery? That is not the game we cowmen play." His face became stern. "We play the game fair or we play it not at all. Don't think for a minute that I shall submit to trickery. That word," he smiled suddenly, winningly, "is not in my dictionary."

CHAPTER X

THE CONTEST

SOME squaws, waist deep in the shore water washing print garments, ducked behind a drift of logs as the *Susie* slanted in toward the landing. They resented the amused stare of the passengers, refused to furnish entertainment for the insolent white man, and so hid themselves with only their heads appearing above the logs, their black eyes snapping defiance. A cavalcade of cowboys swept down to meet the incoming boat with much clatter of hoofs and with clouds of dust. A boat landing at Lower Brule under ordinary circumstances was a novelty, but this one was possessed of unusual interest because it had been early bruited about that he whom the cattlemen south of the Agency were to present as the champion roper, was travelling hither that way. Symes was there to see to it that Burrington had not changed his mind, though there was little fear of that, for his word once given was never broken and his friends knew this and respected him for it. Still, Symes could not help being anxious. He held sectional supremacy as

THE CONTEST

a very precious thing and he had seen this much-lauded hero from the north and had felt instinctively that Tom Burrington of the Seven-up was the only man of theirs who would not be outclassed by this tough, wiry, cool-eyed candidate for new honors. So it behooved him, Symes, to see to it that nothing prevented Tom's entering the lists that afternoon. It was to be the crowning event of the day. Nothing appeals to the cowboy like a good throw and a good tie. Other things would be interesting, even exciting, but there would be nothing quite equal in real sport to the contest, which was the last thing on the programme, with the exception of the Indian grass dance, played in full regalia, with which event any sort of unusual celebration at the Agency always closed, a concession on the part of the Government to the perpetuity of the memory of the days of the Dakotahs.

Those who had come up the river on the boat walked to the Agency, straggling across the prairie by twos and threes, accepting with more or less good-nature the dust of the riders who raced to the pleasure grounds in a childish exuberance of spirits because of the holiday, and perhaps, too, with an unacknowledged impulse to "show

THE HOMESTEADERS

off" their really wonderful prowess before this foolish crowd of tenderfeet from town. Tom walked with his friends, leading his horse, apparently having forgotten all about his uneasiness as to the result of the coming trial. Josephine was so frankly pleased with everything and was so palpably enjoying herself and appealed to him so many times for explanation or confirmation that he had no will to mar her pleasure by any further croaking of evil to come, and so gave himself up to a quiet enjoyment of her high spirits and unbridled curiosity as to anything and everything that concerned the life of these wards of the Government.

The tepees especially interested her. They were laid out in a semi-circle on a wide flat about half a mile from the Agency. They were temporary homes, most of them, pitched thus conveniently for the celebration, their canvas walls gleaming spectrally on the sunny plain, well removed from the shade of the river trees. The Lower Brule Indians had been gathering for days from even the utmost confines of the Reservation and their assembled camp-fires would gleam redly for many a night yet to come.

"I realize perfectly that I am making a tre-

THE CONTEST

mendous nuisance of myself," said Josephine, with a longing glance across the white distance to where the tents sat so lazily in the glare of the sun, "but how I should love to go 'a-visiting.'"

She had shaded her eyes with her gauntleted hands, her felt hat was pushed far back on her head and the moisture on her forehead—the May day was as warm as June—had curled numerous little tendrils of shining hair. She was so altogether lovable, so irresistibly compelling, so intensely feminine in spite of her rough riding attire, and withal so quietly, unquestioningly and unpresumptingly ready for and equal to the emergency of a sojourn in this rough-edged region, that Tom Burrington swore another oath under his breath, a stronger oath than the embryonic one that he had sworn on the day the ice went out, when she sat warming her feet at his own fireside, an oath that she should never leave the cattle country—never—for any other home. He should force it to blossom contentment for her. He hailed a passing buckboard that was in a weird state of dilapidation and rattled whiningly. It was drawn by a pair of ragged and vicious-looking Indian ponies and

THE HOMESTEADERS

they were driven by a deeply seamed, gnarled, hawk-eyed veteran of many a hunt and many a warpath, and this ancient and picturesque red man was at once pressed into service. While the rest of the party made ready for dinner, he drove Tom and Josephine the rounds of the Summer village where Tom was well known to many, and on the most friendly terms with all.

The white canvas of the wall tent testified to the encroaching influence of civilization, but the majority of the tepees were erected on the time-honored plan of the forefathers. A series of poles forming a circle were brought together at the top and tied with strips of rawhide; around these the canvas was stretched, leaving an aperture at the top through which the fumes of the kinnikinnic and, in case of necessity, the smoke of the wood fire might escape. Encircling these crude chimneys and extending two feet above were the crossed tops of the tepee poles. Suspended from each of these poles, like pennants from a staff, was a bright ribbon-like strip of beef much resembling a strip of red flannel. The action of the sun and pure air soon dried these strips, the smoke of the indispensable kinnikinnic cured and flavored them, and the result was, to the red man,

THE CONTEST

a very delectable food product known as jerked beef. In the centre of the semicircle was a tent made of the tanned skins of the buffalo and elk stretched over smoke-stained poles with the moth-damaged hair side on the interior. The outside of the skins, the tanned side, was profusely decorated with Indian drawings in blue, red, and yellow pigments, conveying to the initiated a complete history of the tribe and the occupant. This was the tepee of Standing Cloud, the last of the hereditary chiefs of the Brule Sioux.

Tom and Josephine visited and chatted and gave pennies to the bright-eyed but speechless little children, and bought moccasins, beaded and tribe-marked, right from the feet of a laughing, bashful, young squaw. It was a very pleasant hour for them both and made for good comradeship.

It was not until after dinner, when Tom was finding the best places for his party on a grassy plot to the west of the ball grounds, that he thought at all of the contest in which he himself was to be so important a factor. It would be a grave misfortune to lose the game for his people; not so much for himself, his personal pride could easily stand the shock of defeat, but he could not

THE HOMESTEADERS

bear to think that his friends should lose prestige, and through him; and those northern ranchmen were already arrogant enough. Not so much for himself—that was true—and yet he knew that it would be one of the bitterest moments of his life if, when the sun was low, he must needs come back to—her, across the level stretch of country, figuratively trailing his colors in the dust. If only he were in training! If only, as long as he must, he had planned to do this thing.

The field which had been chosen for the games was about a quarter of a mile from the Agency buildings and a little to the west. Josephine scorned an umbrella, but Mrs. Burrington raised hers with a placid smile of acceptance of her inability to love the unguarded sun of the prairie, and prepared to take a sort of resigned interest in the proceedings. People had begun drifting thither long before the hour set. They were a strange assemblage—cow-punchers, ranchmen, people of the town, a smattering of government officials, and a host of Lower Brule and Crow Creek Indians. There was much talking and eating of peanuts, much betting and much smoking of cigarettes, in the midst of which the programme of events was opened.

THE CONTEST

There was a ball game first between a bunch of town boys and a stalwart nine composed entirely of young Brule bucks—lost to the town, for which Josephine leaned over and hugged Rosebud ecstatically, while Rosebud said nothing though her eyes shone with pleasure and pride. Horse races and foot races followed each other in rapid succession. There was a round of bronco busting in which Bear Heart acquitted himself with much glory, outclassing his worthiest rival on a foul of “grabbing leather,” and then while the enthusiasm for the good showing made by the Indian from the southern Reservation was at its highest pitch, Tom Burrington arose from his place beside his friends on the grassy plot and slipped quietly away in search of his horse.

It was very warm. The sky of the late and cloudless afternoon was very blue. The wind of the plains was holding its breath so that it was very still everywhere except in that one tiny spot set down in the midst of illimitable, solemn, and shimmering space where a handful of human beings yelled lustily and gyrated foolishly and otherwise disported themselves as if they were of much, much consequence. They were people of the plains, accustomed only to God's heavens and

THE HOMESTEADERS

the limitless stretch of scenery to bound their enthusiasm, so that their isolation was not strikingly palpable to them, and yet they were men, so that their play was the less incongruous to them.

There were seven entries for the roping contest, and the rough badinage that was without malice amongst the contestants and their friends, kept the crowd in a tumult of good humor.

Bill Dulan, a tall, muscular, middle-aged athlete, foreman and joint proprietor of the I bar U ranch located near the border line, an adept with the rope and a sure shot with rifle or "six-gun," was chosen as referee. Climbing upon the arch above the smaller gate of the corral, he proceeded to announce the rules of the contest. With a bow directed toward the group of ladies, he described a wide semi-circle with his broad-brimmed light hat with a fair leather strap for a band, and began:

"Ladies, cow-punchers, feller citizens, and Injuns, this here 's goin' to be a contest and you can bet your life it 's goin' to be fair. The I bar U outfit never plays a favorite; you can put your money on your favorite puncher and you 'll sure collect if he 's the swiftest with his string. Bud

THE CONTEST

McGonnigal of Texas is holdin' the world's record at thirty-seven seconds and the rules here will be Bud's rules, 'Steer down and hog-tied, three feet tied together.' No dead steers count, so look out for the broken necks or you will have to try again. Your throw rope and two six-foot ropes in the belt must do the business. Now some of you galoots splice your ropes together and run a half ring from the fence at the right to the fence to the left of this gate and the puncher sets his saddle by the gate and moves narry a peg until the steer crosses the line."

Five of the contestants had cheerfully performed their part of the game, all having hog-tied their steers in artistic fashion, but none of them having gotten below the minute record. One neck was broken and the Indians had dragged off the carcass for beef.

When the man from the north country rode up to the gate of the enclosure where the untamed monarchs of the range were milling restlessly, a great cheer ascended into the vaulted blue and went sounding over the prairie. His reputation had preceded him and some of his admirers even expected him to break the record of Bud McGonnigal. With his advent upon the field began the

THE HOMESTEADERS

real interest of the day. He was a well-built young fellow, not so large as Tom, but tough, wiry, supple, entirely at home in the saddle. He was apparently oblivious to the furor into which his appearance had thrown the crowd. He shifted his quid of tobacco carelessly and bided his time with the utmost unconcern, one leg thrown over the saddle horn, one hand toying with the roached mane of his cow horse. He was not an individual owner, but was foreman of a big syndicate ranch in the middle north. Sitting there so carelessly, he was the picture of self-confidence, sure of his ability to throw a rope, range-bred and consequently haughty in manner; but he lacked Tom's general popularity, on account, in part, of his connection with outside capital. Still, numerous friends from the Pierre country had followed him here—a boisterous, confident, clamorous bunch of rooters, who vociferously rallied to his support and promptly covered every dollar put up by the southern men, who were equally confident of their champion's ability to humble the pride of this arrogant northerner. The betting ran high and incessant. The honor of the range forbade that this stranger out of the north, reputed to be so wonderfully expert,

THE CONTEST

rumored to have made Montana's record, should set the time for the Dakota ranges.

Conspicuous among the Pierre contingent was Frank LaDue, loud-mouthed, swaggering, and betting heavily against the man from his own country.

"Loyal to his home range and a man of high notions of honor," said Jack, in an ironical undertone.

"Well, of course," Josephine excused him, conscientiously, though reluctantly, "he is not a real cattleman, you know. He is only a—chopper of wood. So I suppose that he ought not to be held culpable for arraying himself on the side of his own personal inclinations."

"He is Tom's neighbor, just the same," retorted Jack, finding no shadow of a justification of the man's unusual conduct, "and he derives his livelihood from the southern ranges. He has belittled an affair of honor among peoples to the level of a vulgar personal spite of no moment. He might at least have had the decency to stay at home."

"I don't care, I am glad he is betting so steep," broke in Louis, vengefully. "Old skeezicks! When he loses everything he's got and is

THE HOMESTEADERS

nothing but a beggarly old bankrupt, he need n't think he can come whining around Tom for a job. No, siree! Why, Tom would n't any more dream of letting him punch one of his cows than he 'd dream of flying over the moon, and if he did I 'd punch his head for it. Gee!"

The corral gate at the right of the champion of the north country swung back and instantly every eye was bent upon the opening. Out trotted a steer with his horns low to the ground and, catching sight of the crowd, essayed to turn and rejoin his fellows; but the gate swung shut, a cowboy yell went up from the crowd, and the magnificent animal, throwing his muzzle high in the air, started with the swiftness of a stag for the open prairie beyond. As he crossed the twenty-yard line, the feet of the waiting horseman dropped into the stirrups with a click, his right hand sank to the throw rope upon his saddle, his left grasped the reins and the rowels sank into the flanks of the cow horse. Half a dozen swift leaps and the rope went singing through the air, the loop settling over the head of the terrified steer. The horse swerved suddenly to the right, fetching the slack of the rope down over the left side and thigh of the steer, then, as suddenly

THE CONTEST

facing the animal, he braced his feet for the inevitable shock, as the rider took a half hitch in the rope around the saddle horn, leaping to the ground as the steer landed fairly on his back. The horse began backing away to keep the rope tight as the cowboy sprang toward the prostrate animal, fashioning a loop in one of his short ropes as he ran. Dropping this over the right hind foot as it came forward in a kick, he swiftly took a half hitch around the right fore foot as the two met; tying the loose end of the rope around the other fore foot, he raised both hands aloft and the steer lay "hog-tied," unable to arise. The stentorian voice of Bill Dulan announced the time, "Thirty-nine seconds," and the crowd broke into wild cheering, friend and foe alike giving credit to the fine horsemanship and the excellent work of the stranger. There was nothing narrow about these men; they gave praise ungrudgingly where praise was due.

When Tom Burrington rode up to the gate, a sudden hush fell upon the people while they measured him by those thirty-nine seconds. "Can he do it?" was the query of north and south alike as they gazed upon the perfect physique and careless smile of the champion of the southern

THE HOMESTEADERS

slope. Then cheer upon cheer went up from admiring throats as the ranchmen did homage to their hero who was to uphold the honor of the southern range. He rode easily, smilingly, to his station. If he was disturbed by a doubt as to his ability to lower the excellent record set, no one was the wiser by look or sign from him. He was perfectly self-contained as he turned his gaze toward that portion of the ground where his particular friends had been seated in close proximity to an umbrella. There was no umbrella visible now. It lay trampled in the dust under foot, while the low, reddening sun of the closing day beat unheeded upon the gray head of a handsome, stately woman of the city, who had arisen with the rush of intense feeling called forth by the appearance there at the gate of her big, self-reliant, smiling, splendid son. Beside her stood Josephine, her eyes bright as stars, the color burning in her cheeks, her lips parted. To these two, Tom doffed his plainsman's hat and then laughed aloud to see his small but wildly enthusiastic brother dragged back by the hand of Carroll as he would have rushed to him in his boyish excitement.

During the short interval between his arrival

THE CONTEST

and the opening of the gate, the betting was renewed, eager voices calling their challenges and others equally loyal promptly accepting them. Suddenly, startlingly distinct, came the astonishing proposition:

“I’ve got another hundred here, boys! Two to one on Pierre!”

The speaker was Frank LaDue—a close neighbor, as neighbors were in that day, of the Seven-up ranch. An attempt to repeat the challenge was literally drowned in the chorus of voices anxious to cover his extraordinary bet.

The smile left Tom’s lips and his eyes narrowed in the old dangerous way. He was dressed simply as the cowboy dresses when on duty, without the showy embellishments of an earlier day or the affectation of a later. His dark blue flannel shirt fitted easily over his broad shoulders and was left open at the throat. The inevitable gauntletted gloves, to protect his hands from the scorching of a possible running rope, were without ornament or fringe. At his belt on either side hung the short tie-rope peculiar to the contest. His trousers were tucked into his riding boots, that had the high cowboy heels to prevent the foot slipping too far into the stirrup. About

THE HOMESTEADERS

his throat was a gay, loosely knotted, carefully adjusted handkerchief.

The gate swung back once more and a shaggy, black three-year-old steer came through it with a bellow and made a break for freedom. Scarcely had its hoofs touched the distance line when Tom's horse was after it with the sagacity of a trained cow horse, while the crowd went deathly still. Tom's muscular right arm circled above his head, shot forward, and the noose settled over the head of the steer with a full third of the rope's length to spare. He had never made a better throw in his life and he knew it and exulted in victory in sight. The half hitch around the saddle horn had been taken and the tie-rope was in his hand as the horse braced himself for the shock. When it came, the horse went over backward while saddle and rider shot through the air as if projected from a catapult.

"For God's sake, keep the people back!" cried Jack, who was the first to reach the motionless, white-faced form that lay stretched upon the grass. "Symes, Bear Heart! Keep them back, I say! We must have air!"

It was the mother who took the quiet head upon her lap, sitting there upon the trampled



“ Saddle and rider shot through the air ”

THE CONTEST

earth, but Josephine had taken one of the inert hands and was chafing it, softly, blindly, while Louis gave vent to his grief in wild sobs. But Tom was only stunned and no bones were broken and when water was brought and his face laved in it, he opened his eyes and gazed about in a bewildered manner, and then, remembering, smiled.

"Well, I lost out. I did the best I could. Tell the boys I'm sorry. What happened? How came I here?"

"It was n't fair," sobbed Josephine.

Tom raised his eyes caressingly to her face.

"I don't seem to remember just what happened," he said, "but it must have been fair."

When it was ascertained beyond doubt that Tom was not killed, not even seriously injured, congratulations for the unannounced winner began, and the crowd, somewhat subdued, commenced to disperse. Most of the Indians had already stolen away to make preparations for their grass dance and were even now assembling in the unfloored, corral-like bowery that had the heavens for its canopy, the leafy branches for its walls, and the grass of the prairie for its carpet.

"Look! Look!" cried Louis, and coming to-

THE HOMESTEADERS

ward the group kneeling about the fallen champion, was Bear Heart carrying over his arm the saddle that had so treacherously given way at the crucial moment. Tom had scarcely struck the ground when a dozen riders were after the maddened steer as he dashed away and the rope and saddle were recovered promptly.

"Ugh! Waniche!" grunted Bear Heart, inadvertently lapsing into the laconic brevity of the Sioux, as he pointed to the cleanly broken girth-strap dangling from the saddle, his face sternly fixed and his eyes keenly ablaze with the light of discovery.

Tom sprang to his feet with a suddenness that set his head to spinning and almost unbalanced his mother and Josephine, who were kneeling one on either side of him.

"Let me see it," he commanded, peremptorily.

"Bear Heart is right," said Jack, slowly passing the saddle up for Tom's inspection.

The break had occurred under the saddle skirt where the ladigo strap passes through the cinch ring—a leather-covered ring, hidden from view by the saddle skirt. It was a clean break—too clean—and the Indian redeeming his promise to the boy to watch, had discovered it, and his eye,

THE CONTEST

trained by practice to note the slightest sign, had detected in the break foul play.

"What does it mean?" asked Josephine, breathlessly watching the stern faces of the men.

"It means," said Tom, painfully straightening himself and placing a steadying hand upon Jack's shoulder, "it means that some one cut that strap with a sharp knife, just enough so that the strain of cinching the saddle would not break it, in all probability, but the sudden strain of the falling steer would surely snap it, as it did. It means, too, that my fall was a foul and that I have another trial coming in this contest—if I may have your saddle, Symes."

"No, no, Tom!" cried Josephine, a note of pain, too sharp and sudden to be disguised, ringing in her voice. His only answer was a swift look and a reassuring smile.

"You shall not do it," declared the elder woman, vehemently, "Is n't one killing enough? You are as weak as a babe and it would simply be suicide, and I forbid it!"

"You — are too much shaken up to try again," pleaded Josephine.

"And you would only lose," argued Mrs. Burington, desperately, realizing even as she spoke

THE HOMESTEADERS

that she was wasting words in attempting to change the stubborn mind of her unswerving son who had determined his course and would follow it even if the heavens should fall.

"It would have taken all your strength before. What can you do now that your strength is gone?" she continued, rebelling hotly, but, she felt, in vain, against the clearly formed but yet unspoken decision of her son.

"I am afraid you are pretty weak yet, Tom," advised Jack, doubtfully, "I think that you had better call it off for this time, don't you? We can get even later on when you are yourself again."

"Will you get your saddle, Symes?" was the grim answer, and Symes turned gladly toward his horse.

"What 's all this fool talk about a new trial?" demanded LaDue, touching the arm of the referee.

"Burrington gets a new trial. Some one fouled his traps," ruled the referee, curtly.

"The hell you say! A man fool enough to go into a thing like this with a faulty saddle deserves what he gets. Why, the saddle's part o' the game. It is n't professional to be careless

THE CONTEST

with a thing like that. You know that mighty well, Bill," continued the bully.

"It is my decision that the saddle was tampered with to throw this contest. Do you catch that?" responded Bill Dulan, as he turned and looked LaDue squarely in the eye. "Tom Burrington's saddle is the apple of his eye and I'll bet the best string of ponies I've got that it was in perfect condition the last time he looked at it, and I don't think that was very long ago, either, and he gets another chance."

"What right have you to change the rules, or make new ones?" snarled LaDue, angrily.

"I'm the referee and he gets another chance. Do you hear that?" shouted stout-hearted Bill, as he turned his back on the grumbler.

"I've looked at that harness and the gentleman is sure entitled to a fair chance, for he did n't have it before." All heads were turned to look at the new speaker and a cheer went up as they saw that it was the Pierre champion who spoke. They loved fair play, these plainsmen.

The scattering crowd had rushed back to the corrals when it became known that Tom Burrington was to have another trial. His pluck and the general belief that he had been the victim

THE HOMESTEADERS

of foul play had made him more than ever a favorite.

Again it was a black steer that was released—a hornless galloway, as wild as a native buffalo and as fleet as an ordinary horse. But Tom's mount was a racer. As the black mass crossed the line, the horse made a mighty spring that had often won for him as a quarter horse, and in a moment had closed up the intervening gap and was pressing close to the steer's side; yet Tom's arm hung by his side with the hondeau of the loop resting on his thumb. The vast crowd stood motionless, scarcely daring to breathe, as the people realized that the champion of the south, fearing probably for his strength, contemplated the most difficult of all throws, a foot catch. It was not only the most difficult, but also the most uncertain catch even for an expert such as he was.

Suddenly the arm raised, the rope shot out, the loop missing the steer's head by several feet, and a groan went up from the women and tenderfeet; but the cowmen held their breath in admiration as Tom's stout lungs let out a yell that caused the steer to dodge suddenly to the right and the trick was accomplished. His shoulders striking the rope just above the loose-sliding

THE CONTEST

hondeau, caused the loop to swing toward him, and with the next lunge, both his front feet went into it. Like a flash the horse turned to the left, answering the pressure of Tom's knee, for he had dropped the reins and already held the short tie-rope in his hand.

The rope tightened, with a snap like a pistol shot, as the horse wheeled and braced his feet. But the saddle held, and the galloway, turning a complete somersault, lay struggling with his front feet effectually tied and one of his hind legs over the rope below the hock joint. With a skill that comes only with a cool head and long training, Tom deftly dropped the short rope over the free hind leg and, with the rapidity almost of thought, put a half hitch over the other and a final tie over the two front feet together, and the steer lay helpless with his four feet tied together.

Tom's hands went into the air and the tensely quiet crowd broke loose in a series of such wild cheers as the little bend had never before heard as the referee announced the result, "Thirty-seven seconds." The world's record had been tied and the honor of the southern range had been upheld.

THE HOMESTEADERS

"By Jove! Thirty-seven seconds with a man whose wind had been completely knocked out of him not half an hour before is going some," said Jack, as they walked back to the Agency through the fast-fading light.

There was a clatter of hoofs, clouds of dust, and a bedlam-like yelling, as an enthusiastic crowd of cowboys swept past them, each shouting some expression of praise for his hero. He was a very human hero and coughed disgustedly at the choking smudge of dust that enveloped them.

"Bully!" shouted Symes. "Bully!" he roared again, ecstatically, as he raced past at the end of the cavalcade. "I've got some two-to-ones to settle with Frank LaDue! Bully!" And "Bully!" yelled Louis from his seat on the saddle in front of Symes, where he was doing his full share of celebrating.

"I am mighty glad that I won for the boys," said Tom, simply, and then he turned toward Josephine. "It is a good country," he added.

CHAPTER XI

THE BIG GULCH

GIRT with the spoils of war, an abandonment of lightsome spirits, loose tongues, and hoarse voices, the victorious delegation from the south swarmed noisily on board the *Susie* with the first coming of dusk, and the stanch little boat, with the telling help of the swift current, chugged and quivered its rapid way down the darkening river. Their friends from the Seven-up remained in town for the night, but Jack and Josephine rode home through the still late hours, for at the Broken Key there had been no one left behind to tend the stock which had been turned loose to feed at will. With them rode the Indians, Rosebud and Bear Heart.

In the early morning of the next day, Jack and Josephine together drove the cattle northward and across the big gulch, where a well defined cattle trail led to the grass lands beyond. At noon of the same day, Jack came into the living room of the Broken Key with stern eyes

THE HOMESTEADERS

and a determined set to the jaws that were so rapidly losing their boyish curves. He ate his mid-day dinner silently. Josephine, too, said little. At one o'clock he put a lump of sugar in his pocket, left the room, went to the stable, took down his saddle and bridle, flung them across his shoulders, and returned to Josephine.

"Jack!" she cried, in appealing remonstrance, "You are not going to cross the river with—him?"

"Why not?" asked Jack, with a half return of his old gay smile. "It is quite in keeping, according to my notion, for him to furnish me transportation in order that I may lodge my complaint against him with the proper authorities. He has given me just cause for complaint. Surely, then, he owes me the means of prosecuting the same. Is not that a logical and reasonable supposition, sister mine? You would not want our neighbor to mutilate his free gift by not allowing him to put on the finishing touches, would you? It is a rare talent, Jo, that has the grace to accept generously. We will cultivate it, you and I."

"You would make fun if you were going to die this minute," said Josephine. "But I am

THE BIG GULCH

afraid, Jack. It seems just like—oh, I do not know what it seems like, but it seems awful. Why don't you go around by Kemah? Cannot you ford White River somewhere?"

"Oh, yes, but it is much farther. I'll just take my rifle—if you will hand it to me—that's a good girl. It is the only gun I know anything about and so what's the use of hampering myself with those foolish little forty-fivers the gentlemen of the northern ranges affect so lovingly? If I had occasion to shoot at a rattler like enough I should blaze away with the butt end levelled at him. Who would care for Josie then? But, Josephine," he continued, more soberly, "you need not be in the least afraid. Henry Hoffman is going to row me across in the skiff and in all probability I shall not see LaDue at all. I shall take a horse from the other side. Hence this loaf of sugar."

"Let the old cow go," whispered Josephine, slipping her arms around the neck of this young pioneer brother of hers, whose high hopes and lofty ambitions would make him a cattleman of the great northern ranges by and by—if it was to be. He seemed to her very young in that moment and she had a choking, blind longing to

THE HOMESTEADERS

“mother” him as if he were a child and to keep the creeping shadows of an unknown trouble away from him if she could. She was two years younger than Jack and yet it seemed to her that she was much, much older. “I am afraid, Jack. Don’t let us quarrel with our neighbor. What is the use? Where will it all end? Let us go back—home, Jack, shall we?”

“Why, Josephine, if you are really afraid to stay alone, I won’t go to-day. I will wait until the next time Rosebud comes along so that she can stay with you. I wish she were here now or I wish that we might both go. Suppose we do. Get on your bonnet and we will both go. Everything went well yesterday during our absence, why should it not again?”

“No,” said Josephine, resolutely, “the cattle are feeding in strange places and they must come home to-night. Besides,” she added, indignantly, “why should I be afraid for myself?” He had meant to make her indignant, so he smiled at her with caressing amusement. “You know that I am not afraid for myself. It is you, Jack. Why do they hate you so?”

“I wish I knew,” said Jack, wistfully. “I always thought I was a pretty good sort of a fel-

THE BIG GULCH

low, myself. That is where you erred—you people of my ‘ain countrie.’ You tried to make me think so—you know you did—and now I have to suffer for the mistake that was not originally mine. For an eradicator of self-conceit, commend me to the West, Josephine.”

“Jack, why don’t you ask Tom Burrington?” said Josephine, suddenly.

A shadow came into Jack’s eyes and lingered there while he gazed for a long moment over Josephine’s bright head, beyond the great yellow river with the arrogant push of its channel, beyond the hills with their whispering grasses, aye, beyond the lonely ranges themselves—away—far away—to the South.

“I am afraid, Josephine,” he said at last, soberly, “I am afraid that Tom knows.” Then he was gone and Josephine crept back into the still house to wait for the long afternoon to pass so that Jack could come home again.

It was a long afternoon and the house seemed far lonelier to-day than any other day when Jack had been gone. It was a listless day, too, so that there was no work that she seemed to want to do. Presently she left the little low room with its ghostly corners and insistent silence and sat on

THE HOMESTEADERS

the door step with a bit of sewing in her hands. Here, although she could not see it, it seemed that she could feel the solemn rushing of the water journeying southward and to-day she let herself drift away upon its tawny flood and dreamed the long, Summer hours through until it seemed true that she and Jack and no other in all the world were gliding along with the current, slipping away from the sinister shadows and the mocking mysteries that were settling down upon the valley, so that with all its wideness and all its promise one must choke with the creeping shadows unless one could slip away as she and Jack were slipping—quietly—with no one to know—out of the gloom and into the sun-shot land of their own people.

And then Tom stopped on his way home. His mother and Louis had gone directly to the Seven-up from Velpen earlier in the day, but Tom had found it necessary to visit one of his northern line ranches and was only now on his way home. Josephine had long since forgotten that she had meant to sew. Now, however, she picked up the work that had fallen from her idle fingers and smiled to think how far away she had been, and was glad, when he sat down beside her on the

THE BIG GULCH

rough log door step, because she was not to be alone for a little while, anyway.

"Where is Jack?" he asked, wondering why her eyes had grown so much sadder since he had seen her last — only yesterday.

"He has gone to town," she said. And then it came to her — what Jack had said: "I am afraid Tom knows." If Tom knew, why did he not tell them? A vague doubt stirred in her heart. She glanced at him quickly. The gray eyes were looking at her steadily, full of friendliness. How strong he was! How strong he had been and how quick on that day when he had drawn her away from the dark water that was rushing and writhing under the ice. He had not faltered once nor hesitated in that great hour of her peril — and his. She should like to ask him if the stealing of the cow was all one with that supposedly wide-spread feeling against them as homesteaders, and whether it was an earnest of what was to come if they remained in the cattle country. She should like to ask him how universal was the prejudice. He would know and he could tell them what to do. But if he already knew, why did he not tell them? Were she and Jack the ones to beg the courtesy of fair dealing? Or

THE HOMESTEADERS

to force a confidence upon one who would perhaps receive it reluctantly? Her pride rebelled. It might be that his interests, too, demanded that they leave the country. Perhaps that was what Jack meant. She had never thought of that. It was strange that she and Jack should be considered so formidable that it was becoming necessary to send them into exile—they were just two lonely young people in a strange land. What did it all mean? Her mouth trembled, her eyes were heavy with unshed tears, so that she could not see to take any more stitches. The big ranchman who had been waiting for her to break the silence between them was troubled.

"Tell me what it is that troubles you, Josephine," he said, gently.

"It is nothing," she said, making a supreme effort to control her emotion.

He tapped his high-heeled riding boots with his whip, restlessly.

"Josephine," he pleaded at last, his handsome head very close to hers as he bent toward her, "something has happened. My girl, you look heart-broken. You cannot hide it from me. Tell me. Let me help you if I can. Do not forget that we are neighbors, you and I."

THE BIG GULCH

"I am very foolish, Mr. Burrington," she said, quietly. "I have been worrying about Jack — just as if he could not take care of himself anywhere. But somehow I cannot help thinking of him as a boy all the time and fussing over him accordingly. He would not thank me for it, I am sure. Mr. LaDue politely stole one of our cows the other day and Jack naturally objected to such high-handed procedure and has gone up to town to see what the law can do for us and for him. There is not the least cause for worry. I just got to thinking."

"Why did you not tell me this yesterday?" asked Tom, gravely.

"Why should you have been compelled to give ear to our little private quarrels when you had so much to think about that was of more importance?" she counter-questioned. "You will stay for supper?"

"No," he said, rising. "I must go. I have been up country and want to get home before dark. Josephine—" he began and stopped. He wanted to take her in his arms and make her tell him why she cried, but the proud little tilt to her chin restrained him. He turned quickly and was gone. Josephine was alone again.

THE HOMESTEADERS

The sun was getting low when she buckled on her leggings and pinned on her big hat to go for the cattle. The new feeding grounds for the Broken Key herd were about one mile distant, just beyond the big gulch which led down from the edge of the high ridge of hills on the west to the river, meandering somewhat up by the hills, following the line of least resistance, but on the bottom cutting almost squarely across the land which Josephine Carroll had staked out for herself. In June, when the annual rise was at its flood, the overflow backed up the deep, narrow ravine for some distance but seldom as far as the old trail, which was a relic of the days when Dakota pony herds held sway and when no white man's cattle might feed on this rich land, with its inestimable water front, without permission of the Government. But now on this last day of May, the water was comparatively low and the gulch lay safe and dry from its source up in the hills to the very river itself. Josephine rode slowly. The sun was still above the broken line of the horizon—the evenings were long and light—so that there was little danger of darkness falling before she had her little bunch safely corralled

THE BIG GULCH

unless many had strayed away. She was growing used to the direct sun of the plains and the white glare troubled her but little these days, and now that the rays were yellowing and struck her slantingly, she did not mind them at all, but took off her wide hat and pinned it to her saddle horn. She was cooler so. The prairie dogs scolded her in shrill, vigorous language as she rode through their village, defying her smartly, only to skurry into ignominious retreat when she passed near them in friendly spirit, innocent alike of the intent or of the arms of war. Gradually, the calm of the Summer evening came to Josephine. The day was done. It was over, all the anger, the hurt confidence, and the vague, uneasy groping after something that could not be grasped, for all the groping endeavor. Jack would soon come now and there would be a cheery little late supper, a talk on the door step in the sweet, wide outdoors of the moonlit night,—and to-morrow would be a new day.

The cattle had not strayed far. Neither were they of a contrary temper to-night. They filed across the big gulch slowly, but of one mind. Josephine hummed a snatch of a Southern folk

THE HOMESTEADERS

song happily to herself and thought of many things that were of little kin to the thoughts of the day that was done.

Shortly before this, a man had made his way leisurely through the heavy undergrowth to the northern end of the island, crossed the slough, which was lower and wetter at this point than farther below, on a reef of rocks, entered the mouth of the gulch and sauntered carelessly westward. He had not progressed far, in truth the old pony trail lay dusty and travelworn still some distance before him, when he heard a faint sound. He paused, inclining his ear to the north. He had not been mistaken. The sound was plainly distinguishable in the hush of the early evening. He hesitated a moment. A clod of dirt, loosened by the touch of heavy feet, went rolling down the trail and at the same time a little cloud of dust arose as the vanguard of the Broken Key herd slid down the steep pathway. Nearer to the trail, a clump of cedars growing from the northern side made an excellent hiding place. But the leader of the herd was already climbing the opposite incline. He heard a clear, joyous, ringing cattle call and the voice that sent

THE BIG GULCH

it forth on the still air was a girl's voice. Without proceeding any farther toward the trail, he climbed half way up the bank and crept into the shadow of a small hollow that had been washed out by the spring rains. Then he waited, and presently Josephine, softly singing her mournful, sweet melody, rode down into the valley.

The old trail was destined to be not a lonely trail that night. It was as if the ghosts of the dim past, of a day when the dusky habitants made history that was never written, had returned for one mad revel—in memoriam. Up from the south came a horseman. He rode rapidly, straight in his stirrups, his hat brim blown back by the violent friction with the air. The little dogs fairly scampered out of sight at the first beat of his horse's feet on their sod without even taking time to bark at him. He had seen the straggling line of the herd coming home and was riding to meet it. He, too, heard the clear, sweet call, and saw the lithe figure of the unconscious girl ride down into the dim valley. The sound of the voice brought a gleam into the gray eyes, the sight of Josephine sent the blood racing tumultuously through his veins so that he thrilled

THE HOMESTEADERS

with the glory of it. If he spurred his horse yet more, he would meet her just as she reached the level again.

What was that thing which moved there by the hollow? Had one of the herd strayed from the beaten trail? Or was it some lone, gaunt timber wolf lurking near to see if a calf or some weakling of the herd did not drop out of the ranks and linger to its undoing? The rider, still on the run, threw up his arm to keep the after-glow out of his eyes, while he swept the darkening hollow with the keen and comprehensive sight of the men of the plains. Suddenly, he knew. A great sternness settled around his mouth. His eyes became cold and hard as steel, while the fierce desire to kill well-nigh choked him with its insistent clamoring to be heard. He was a very primitive man indeed in this hour when one spied upon the woman whom in his heart he had chosen for his own. He drew rein so suddenly that his well-trained cow pony settled back upon its haunches as if with the intuitive expectation of the feel of the tautening rope, even though he had not heard the little sing of it as it cut through the air. For a moment, he hesitated. What was the fellow's business? Why was he hiding while

THE BIG GULCH

Josephine rode across the ravine? Who was he? And then he turned white and cold, sitting on his horse out there on the grassy level, with night coming on, although he did not feel it, did not know it then, for his nerve was never steadier, his sight never truer than when he raised his rifle to the level of his right shoulder and sped the bullet that struck down the hand in the hollow that had steadied another gun pointing with deadly menace up the valley. He shot twice again in rapid succession, and then his horse sprang forward at the cruel jab of the spurs. When he came to the edge of the gulch, the man was gone, gone as if the earth had swallowed him, and there was only Josephine in the valley. She was white of cheek and there was a startled, hunted look in her dark eyes. She had unconsciously dismounted and stood trembling by her pony's shaggy neck.

"He—went toward—the river," she whispered, tremulously.

"Who, Josephine?" asked Tom, a dangerous quiet in his voice. He, too, dismounted and came close to her.

"I did n't see him. I only heard him," she answered, sobbingly.

THE HOMESTEADERS

"Why, Josephine," said Tom, reassuringly, "I did not mean to frighten you like this. But it was such a fine chance—or it seemed to be, rather—that I shot without thinking of you, I am afraid. If I had not been such a blamed bungler you might have had a fine skin for your floor. He was on your land, you know, so that I should have been in duty bound to surrender the spoils to you. I—am not used to missing," he continued, with an engaging smile. "It hurts my pride. He was at ridiculously close range, too."

"Why, what did you shoot at?" demanded Josephine, in unfeigned surprise and relief.

"A big, gray wolf, bless you, who coveted one of your fat heifers," returned Tom, promptly. "I came back to see Jack about that which you were telling me about this afternoon—I could not get it off my mind—and was riding to meet you when that pesky rascal crept across my vision and—I missed him."

"I thought it was a man," said Josephine, and then, because she was ashamed of her unwarranted fright, she flung up her head and looked at him defiantly, two red spots burning in her cheeks. But something in his face made her ask, doubtfully:

THE BIG GULCH

"You are not lying to me, are you?"

"No, Josephine, I am not lying—honest," he said, unsteadily.

She seemed so alone there in the valley that would henceforth be a valley of shadows for Josephine, and she was far, far dearer to him than he had ever before dreamed, even when he had tried, sometimes, to think of the cow country with her gone from it. The effort he made not to snatch her to him, mount and ride away with her, somewhere, anywhere, only with her, out of the shadows, shook in his voice.

"Come, Josephine, let me help you mount and I will take you home."

He held out his hand, she put her foot into it, gave a little spring and slipped into her saddle. But she was not yet free. His strong arms were clasped tightly around her and he leaned his head against her, standing thus, dumb, while real twilight crept over all the land and in the valley it grew quite dark. Josephine forgot to ask him why, if he knew, he had not told them, and, a little blindly, let her ungauntleted hand grope softly through his hair as he stood looking up at her.

"Do you love me, Josephine?" he whispered.

THE HOMESTEADERS

“Let me go, Tom,” she said, unsteadily. “We must go home. The cattle will stray.”

She tried to unclasp his hands with earnest, ineffectual fingers—so ineffectual that Tom laughed, suddenly caught the little struggling hands in his, laid his face upon them, kissed them, held them against his breast, kissed them again, then released her, and they rode together out of the valley.

CHAPTER XII

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

“**I**F it had been I, now,” said Jack, “I could believe that mischief was meant. But Josephine—why, what could any one have against Josephine? Men do not make war on women, Tom, especially without good cause—and what cause has that generous-hearted girl given for such deviltry? For that matter, what have I done? But, with or without reason, I have been literally hounded since the day of my arrival. Frankly speaking, I resent it. I shall continue to resent it, and that right smartly. Some day, when I have gained immunity, I shall demand explanation and apology. Meanwhile, I am biding my time. I shall not be surprised at anything that anybody may attempt to do to me; but I honestly think that you are mistaken about such evil intent towards Josephine, Tom.”

“Granted that men do not war on women,” returned Burrington, gravely, “what about brutes? Can you say the same of them? You did not see what I saw, Jack. I think you would believe what I believe if you had seen.”

THE HOMESTEADERS

It was very early. Josephine, singing happily over the getting of the breakfast, wondered what errand had brought their neighbor of the Seven-up so early in the morning. Would he say anything to Jack about what had happened last night? She did not mean about the missing of the wolf—of course Tom would tell that—had told it last night, in all probability—though she could not altogether remember. It was like him to tell that on himself, laughingly. Men usually sure of themselves could always afford a laugh at their own expense. But what had happened afterward—would he say anything about that? After all, what had happened? She could not altogether remember.

Jack was down at the woodpile splitting wood when Tom rode into the clearing. They had not come up to the house at all and were talking earnestly together right there at the woodpile, Jack leaning against a sapling, his brown face still damp and flushed from his recent exertion, while Tom Burrington, still mounted, though sitting with both feet on one side of the saddle, absently trailed the thongs of his whip over the toes of his riding boots. It was obviously a grave matter—that upon which their minds were bent.

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

Well, it was a serious situation — hers — if that was what engrossed their attention. How could she ever leave Jack? He was in trouble and he was alone but for her — and besides, she had forgotten — how easy it was, sometimes, to forget — did Tom Burrington know something that he ought to tell them and would not? Even though he himself were free of personal blame, yet if he knew and would not tell them — that good honor, which makes loyalty to class an obligation that high-minded men may not disregard, had been offended, and that offence was always unforgivable. What should she say when the boys came up? But the boys did not come.

“You did not know the man?” asked Jack, thoughtfully.

“I did not recognize him. It was dusky in the gulch and he had disappeared when the smoke of my gun had lifted. Don’t you think that if he had not been on some devil’s errand he would have made his presence known? I tell you, Carroll, it looks bad.”

“Still, he might not have known that you were a peaceful and law-abiding citizen. You must confess that you made your advent upon the scene in rather a startling and belligerent man-

THE HOMESTEADERS

ner. I do not know anything, Tom, of course, but I just cannot believe that any one would want to kill Josephine. Kill Josephine! Why, it is a monstrous thought. I do not believe it."

"Not know me? Of course he knew me! Everybody knows me, and that is not sounding my own praises, by any means. To be sure he knew me. Besides, I was in the light on the upland while he was in shadow. He could n't help but know me. Moreover, if he took me for a desperate character, why did he not stay and fight for Josephine. Tell me that, Carroll. There is n't a man on the Seven-up who would sneak away and leave a Dakotah Indian woman in danger under such circumstances, let alone a white woman. I tell you, you must take Josephine South or else give her —"

He stopped short, while involuntarily his eyes sought and found the open doorway of the cabin where the figure of a girl passed once in a while and sometimes glanced his way. Jack did not notice the significance of the pause.

"I never thought of that," he said. "Yes, why did he run from you and why did he run from Josephine? I don't know what to do, Tom. If I take her South, that means a general

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

break-up. She would not stay there unless I gave up my hold here and stayed with her. I should have to tell her the reason for her going back—part of it, at least—so she would never consent to my coming back here. I know Josephine—and there are only we two, you know. I cannot afford to give up. We have risked too much to pick up and leave it all—except of necessity. Of course, if what you say is true, I shall not hesitate a moment to take her away; but it is so hard to believe and I am much disposed to stay and find out for myself what it all means. I shall not leave Josephine alone again,” he drew himself up a little proudly, “so there is no cause for worry on that score. Until I ascertain the meaning of the deviltry that seems to be in the air, I shall not let Josephine out of my sight. You may rest assured of that. If it is as you say, I shall then take Josephine South and come back and put the snake-in-the-grass where his fangs won’t count for much any more.”

“You will do as you think best, of course,” said Burrington, perceiving by the younger man’s attitude that the subject was closed. “By the way, Carroll,” he continued, casually, “that was not my only object in coming to see you this

THE HOMESTEADERS

morning. I had two axes to grind, in fact. How would you feel about taking a little excursion up into the Westover country? I need a man and you are just the kind I want—all grit and nerve. Josephine could stay with mother, you know, and I'd send a boy over to look after your stock. What do you say?"

Jack hesitated just a moment—for Josephine's sake; but when he thought of that February storm and of Tom Burrington's part in it, all doubt as to his course left him immediately.

"I say that I am your man with all my heart," said the boy from the South, promptly. "You have found yourself a loser?"

"To the tune of seventeen head of as fine horses as run on this side Old Muddy. They are the home ranging kind, too, and yet I have scoured the whole near country for them—rode two days and could not get wind of them at all until last night late—heard then that some one had seen them up near Westover. Now that means foul play, of course—home horses do not find themselves away up at Westover—unless they are native to the soil or are helped there—one of the two. Horses, as you probably know, do not wander like cattle. It will not be a pleas-

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

ure party by any means, Jack, and I shall not be at all hurt if you decline to go. Now please do not go dignified so quickly. No one doubts your nerve. I was thinking of Josephine."

"She need not know our errand," interrupted Josephine's brother, with convincing brevity. "As for the rest, according to your own theory, she is safer surely at the Seven-up than at the Broken Key."

It had come to him, suddenly, illuminatingly, who it was that Burrington suspected and that the quest might not be for horses alone, but one in which Tom Burrington knew that he, Jack, would be with him heart and soul. Perhaps—the thought brought out stern lines of determination about the boyish mouth—perhaps the time was come when, as he had said, "the snake-in-the-grass would be put where his fangs would not count for much any more."

"Then you are with me?"

"Do we start this morning?" asked John Calhoun Carroll, calmly.

It was early twilight when they rode silently up to the corral at Dave Myers's ranch on White River. They were seeking refreshment and lodging for the night after almost a full day in

THE HOMESTEADERS

the saddle. They had been following a pretty well defined trail by rumor for some time, but had lately lost it. It was folly to ride a blind trail by night. Dave was a good fellow and would give them the best accommodation he could. They would just turn their horses in with the rest before going to the house. There was no doubt in the world of Myers's hospitality. There seemed to be no one about the place. The house wore a deserted look. Still, that could make no difference in their arrangements. They should simply enter unbidden, cook some supper, and then rest their tired bodies on the object which looked the most like a bed among the half-breed's heterogeneous collection of makeshift house furnishings.

"Good horses he's got," said Jack, drawing rein at the gate.

A short silence followed, during which Jack stretched his wearied limbs and longed heartily with the longing of a hungry boy for the supper that had yet to be prepared.

"He has, indeed," assented Tom, at last, grimly. "You never see that brand on any other kind. I for one do not challenge his taste. The trouble is that the owner of that brand is not

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

the only good judge of horseflesh in this country."

Jack emitted a low whistle of surprise and then said, with untroubled serenity:

"Well, I am right glad to find the trail again."

"You are a brick, dear boy," was the older man's only response as he slipped from his horse and proceeded calmly to relieve him of saddle and bridle. This accomplished, he opened the gate and sent the horse in to rest among his one-time mates.

"Is n't this high-handed procedure a trifle risky?" asked Jack, following suit with ready adaptability to the lead of the chief.

"I have not an idea at just what point the pesky rascals may decide to return to gloat over their lucky haul. A Seven-up concealed in the bushes would not strike them exactly in the light of a white flag of truce, I am thinking; and I imagine that a Broken Key would not have the effect of soothing syrup, either. It will be too dark to notice the difference in the bunch."

"You are evidently not thinking seriously of quietly driving the bunch home now in order to save all further trouble," said Jack, with a smile.

THE HOMESTEADERS

"Such a thought is certainly not weighting me down at present," said Tom, leading the way to the house. "It seems to me that I should kind of like to know who it is that has such an uncontrolled hankering after the fleshpots of the Seven-up. Not Dave Myers—I doubt if he knows anything about this. Would n't you like to know, too, Jack?" he concluded, with a peculiar significance.

"That I would," agreed Jack, heartily, his blood tingling with the lust of conflict.

"And besides," continued Tom, calmly, "I counted only ten. I want my other seven."

They took no extraordinary precaution to conceal their presence. In truth, it was not many minutes before a cheerful fire was rumbling in the rusty stove and the smoke of it was curling up into the slowly coming darkness of the summer night. While Jack, with the sure instinct of healthy hunger, peered into likely places for flour and cured meat and coffee, the more practical Tom fed the fire and put the skillet on to heat for the flapjacks it devolved upon him to make.

"If they see our fire, they will only think that Dave has returned," he remarked, casually, to

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

his companion, "and they are evidently counting on Dave's not talking if he does come back, so what is to hinder our having a fine supper? I for one am fairly starved."

At that moment, the door was quietly opened and a boy entered the room. He seemed not older than twelve years and his thin face went haggard with a child's dread as he saw who it was that so unconcernedly sifted flour over there by the table.

"I thought—they had come back," he faltered, standing with his back to the door, his hand nervously clasping the latch string behind him.

"Who?" asked Tom, indifferently, mixing dough as if everything else in all the world was of little worth as compared with this work upon which he was bent.

"I—I—das'n't tell," said the boy. "He'd kill me if I told."

"Who would kill you, little chap?" asked Tom, gently, thinking of another boy who was about this waif's age and who was very close indeed to the heart of the elder brother.

"He would. I—I—das'n't tell."

"Well, never mind. You need n't tell, little

THE HOMESTEADERS

chap, if you don't want to. You are called the White Slave hereabouts, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know," said the boy miserably.

"Well, I do," said the ranchman, with a sigh.

"Boy, do you know me?"

"Yes."

"Then do just as I tell you to-night, and — you shall not be called the White Slave any longer. Do you understand?"

The boy shook his head.

"Listen then. It is I who have the upper hand now. You see that, don't you? You will do well to serve me to-night. In fact, boy, you had better! When — he — comes back, do his bidding, but say nothing about us. You understand that much? Well, make your choice."

"I don't think he will come to-night," said the boy, after a short silence. "I don't think any one will come back before three o'clock. That's why I could n't understand the smoke."

"Don't lie to me!" cried Tom, sternly. "Tell me the truth. How many are there?"

"I don't know."

"Who is the leader?"

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

"I — das'n't tell."

"Oh, he 's the one who 'd kill you, is he? Why are n't you looking for him to-night?"

"'Cause he 's gone."

"Where to?"

"I — das'n't tell."

"Then the devil take you," exclaimed Tom, in exasperation.

"My boy," put in Jack, quietly, "if you will tell me the truth, you will not have to work for these men any longer. I do not think you quite understood Mr. Burrington. Come here. Poor kid! You have no father or mother, have you? I thought not. Neither have I. Would n't you like to live at the Broken Key? I need some one to herd my cattle. You would never have to come back here, and — there are no "white slaves" at the Broken Key. If you will tell me where your master is and where the rest of Mr. Burrington's horses are and when any one is expected back here, you can go away with me in the morning and you can stay with me for — always, if you like. It is as Mr. Burrington says — we have the upper hand now, but your answering my questions may prevent bloodshed. Won't you tell me?"

THE HOMESTEADERS

The White Slave stared at him with dilating eyes.

"Are you the man he calls Carroll?" he stammered.

"I am."

"Why, he—he—"

"Yes, I know," said Jack, "that he hates me—that is, if we are talking about the same man, and I think we are. He hates Mr. Burrington, too. But what difference does that make between you and me?"

"Well, I won't tell his name," said the boy, with superstitious stubbornness. "He'd hear it, someway, all right. He'd know I told. He knows everything."

"Where is he now?" asked Jack, quietly. "You will tell me, won't you?"

"I don't know where he is. He said he was going to the dugout. If you know where that is, you know more than I do. He took some horses with him."

"You are sure you don't know where the dugout is?"

"I don't know—honest. They never tell me their secrets."

"When did he start?"

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

"At sun-down."

"By Jove!" cried Tom. "If we 'd only been a half-hour earlier!"

"What direction did he go?"

"He crossed White River."

"And when are the other fellows coming back?" asked Jack, with a keen, though veiled glance at the boy.

"They said three o'clock," persisted the boy, "but they crossed White River, too, and I don't think they intend to come back until to-morrow."

"What are you doing here, then, if you are not expecting them?" demanded Tom, suspiciously.

"None o' your business," returned the White Slave, sullenly. He was afraid of the big ranchman of the Seven-up.

"Tell me, my boy," said Jack, gently.

"Well, I was to watch if anybody came. But they was n't lookin' for no one to come. And I was to be here to feed their horses when they did come and cook 'em some grub—if I wanted to keep my liver," said the boy, with evident unwillingness.

"I know what I am going to do," exclaimed Tom, suddenly and determinedly. "I'm going

THE HOMESTEADERS

to run down the boss of this little affair. If the boy is telling the truth, no one will come back here for a day or two at least. It is not likely they would cross White River twice in a night unless there was something pressing. White River is up. I am no good at a waiting game, anyway. If the boy is lying, we'll string him up. Will you go or stay, Jack? I think it would be just as well perhaps for you to stay and watch the premises. Some one might come back, after all, and you could hide in the bushes and report to the officers to-morrow — if I don't get back. But we'll both go if you say the word."

"You'd better both go," advised the White Slave, shortly.

"You're such a cheerful liar, you know," said Tom, calmly, "that we'll just do as we please."

"I reckon I'll stay," said Jack, quietly.

"Good. If I don't strike any trail, I'll be back by three o'clock. Don't take any risks. We're only scouting now, you know, and it's so infernally dark. Keep an eye on the kid. So long."

He slipped out and was gone.

"Will you do just as I say?" asked Jack, turning to the boy.

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

“Yes,” said the boy, with grateful submissiveness. “I will mind you, Mr. Jack Carroll. Are you goin’ to hide in the bushes like Mr. Burrington said?”

“No,” said Jack, a fighting smile on his lips and a gleam in his eyes, “I am not going to hide in the bushes like Mr. Burrington said.”

It was late when the muffled sound of unhurried horses’ hoofs drifted into the quiet room where Jack Carroll waited for the coming of some one, his blood cooled with the wearisome and indefinite delay. He had begun to think that Tom had been right, after all. He slouched back in his chair and listened sleepily to the frantic whirring of a lumbering June bug on the wing and the subsequent dull thud of its foolish contact with the wall. The light had been removed to an inner room and the kitchen was in complete darkness. The White Slave crouched by the window but faintly outlined by the darkness within. There seemed something of stealth in the approaching hoof-beats — perhaps because of the lateness of the hour, the stillness of all else, and because the sound was not a running nor a braggart sound. The steps came nearer — stopped; then startlingly close, grimly amusing be-

THE HOMESTEADERS

cause of its unconsciousness, a deep yawn drifted in through the window and sounded as loudly in the room as if it had originated there. The care-free, unthinking act was closely and harshly followed, however, by the firing in rapid succession of two pistol shots. The White Slave made no move. He seemed incapable of action until a slight shove from Jack's foot warned him and he rose and slipped out into the night.

"It's a wonder you would n't take your time," grumbled the man on the horse, with rough sarcasm. "I'm dead for sleep. Here you are. Give him good water and good feed if you want your liver left whole!"

There was the sound of an opening door. The faintest light of which a cloudless, moonless but starlit summer night is capable of giving crept in, while outside the ineffectual lamps of the fire-flies gleamed and darkened softly.

"Hell!" The man still talked to the boy, who was already beyond hearing. "It's as dark as the inside of a cow. Why the devil did n't you leave that light in the kitchen?"

He stumbled across the room to the streak of yellow that ran along the floor and threw open the door leading into the lighted room beyond.

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

The hand was a heavy one that came down on his shoulder at that moment, so that he turned squarely upon command and threw up his hands, however grudgingly, because there was nothing else to do when he felt the cold steel pressing against his neck. The boy had played fair. He had not told.

"You did that right well, Mr. Horse-thief," said Jack, approvingly. "A clean surrender—no fuss or sloppiness of any kind. Very good. I approve of you."

"Damn!" said the man, shortly.

"Did Frank LaDue go directly to the stable?" asked Jack, carelessly.

"Suppose you go and see for yourself," growled the captive, sullenly.

"Certainly, with all the pleasure in the world," said Jack, readily. "You just rest quietly as you are for a minute or two while I borrow your guns and things, will you? I'll take the belt, too, if you don't mind. Now, don't be too promiscuous with your hands, please. Just a minute while I make a record tie with my rope. Hold your hands close to your sides," demanded Jack, sternly.

There was no mistaking his intention should

THE HOMESTEADERS

there be an offensive move on the part of the outlaw. The sullen horse-thief, swearing softly all the while, nevertheless submitted to be bound hand and foot and rolled into a corner.

"All right?" asked Jack, finally. "If you are ready, I reckon I'll be movin' on."

He nodded to his prisoner, opened the door and passed out. All was still. There was nothing to be heard but the strident frog chorus from the river yonder. Presently, as he paused a moment, listening, he thought he heard a sound that he knew over by the corral—the low, expectant, grateful whinny of a hungry horse that sees his long delayed supper coming at last. He walked swiftly towards the corral, keeping well in the shadows.

"Throw up your hands," he cried, suddenly, in a low authoritative voice, to a dark shape just emerging from the corral. The hands went up while a plaintive voice expostulated:

"Why, is that you, Mr. Carroll? What you got agin me? I ain't never done nothin' to you."

"Well, do something *for* me now," said Jack, curtly. "Make for the house and be quick about it. Keep your hands up, please, until I relieve you of your playthings. Now, then, hurry, will

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

you? I have an engagement with Frank LaDue to-night that I want to keep, so step along lively, please."

"You've got a long ride before you, have n't you?" vouchsafed the prisoner, sociably.

"Not so long as it might be," said Jack, with brief significance, as they entered the house where the first sullen captive lay, grinding his teeth in helpless rage over the shame of this wholesale capture by one man—and him a pilgrim from a far-away country. The second took the affair more philosophically and grinned impudently into the homesteader's face. He, too, submitted without further fight. It was an ugly-looking gun, that, and he did not like the look in the young Southerner's eyes, and besides, down deep in his heart, he was a coward.

Again, Jack left the room. Were there others of the gang still hanging about the premises or were there others yet to come? Was Frank LaDue concerned in this nefarious incident? He steadfastly believed so. He strode toward the dark pile of the stable without his former wariness. He had been so successful thus far that his buoyant spirits could harbor no depressing premonition of a possible reverse of fortune. It

THE HOMESTEADERS

had all been so ridiculously easy. Pure luck had played into his hands. He was almost ashamed of its tameness. He meant, however, to probe this affair to the foundation of it all. He should wring a complete confession from some one or all of these men if he had to resort to some torture process of mediævalism. To-night should determine for them whether or not this secret organization which he and Burrington had run down was in any way in league with that diabolical attempt at Josephine's life. For despite his skepticism, there lurked, down deep in his heart, the awful fear that what Burrington believed might be true, after all.

There was a sudden, sharp report, and a bullet went hurtling by him with an ominous sing and hiss. Though untouched, he dropped, grateful to the kindly darkness that made a man prone on mother earth of little worth as a target. He lay perfectly still for a moment, wondering what effect the unexpected shot would have upon the White Slave, but trusting to his good judgment not to squeal regardless of any little gun play there might be. Or had the boy already told? Perhaps, nay probably, this was the arch-thief of all and the boy's fear of his master had been

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

stronger than his promises to Jack. He had as yet seen nothing, but the shot had come from the direction of the barn, so that he was between the enemy and the house. It was a good advantage. The gods had surely been with him this night. He strained his sight houseward. If the outlaw knew that his comrades were prisoners there, he might not readily accept an opportunity for escape. Their brotherhood was a right loyal one. If he knew! Did he know? Jack began creeping back toward the house. Suddenly, a stream of light poured out into the night as the door was unexpectedly opened and the White Slave stumbled into the kitchen. But his was not the only figure thus revealed. In the outer circle of light loomed up the sinister outlines of a man to whose greedy gaze stood now unveiled the picture of the whole situation and he saw with understanding. But Jack saw, too, and comprehended more quickly because there was nothing in it new to him but the figure daubed on in the foreground, so that while there were two explosions, his was first and went home, while the second went far astray and was lost. It was thus Jack fulfilled his obligation to the White Slave. He did not doubt that the outlaw's

THE HOMESTEADERS

bullet was meant to end the life of the child who had told.

"You've got us, Carroll," said the last captive, lying white and spent upon Dave Myers's bed, after his enemy had stanchd the flow of blood from his shoulder. "Now what are you goin' to do with us?"

"I don't know you, although you are pretty familiar with my name," said Jack, gravely. "Did you know that your den had been raided?"

"I sort o' suspected," said the man, with a sour grin, "when I made out your slim shanks comin' towards me. So when I missed you, I made for the house just to investigate sort o', you know. I did n't know then that I'd missed you plum but I was afraid to go very close to you for fear you were playin' 'possum. Good Lord! If I'd a only knowed there was only you, a scrawny, white-livered, stiff collar feller! A tenderfoot! A milk and honey boy! Damn! I supposed o' course Tom Burrington was in here and a whole carload o' off'cers. I thought I'd peek in at the winder and see what was goin' on when the kid here saved me the trouble by openin' the door." He glared at the cowering boy, malevolently.

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

"What made you, kid?" asked Jack, gravely.

"I was afraid o' the shootin'," said the White Slave, whimpering. "I wanted to get under the bed. But I did n't tell on you, honest I did n't."

"Well, never mind. There is just the one thing that I want to know of you," said Jack, turning once more to the wounded man, "the rest you had better keep to tell to the officers; but what I want to know won't keep."

"Fire ahead."

"Is Frank LaDue mixed up in this affair?"

"That 's none o' your business," responded the prisoner, insolently.

"I wish you would tell me," said Jack, earnestly, "and tell me now—to-night. It is a matter of life or death. Where is he now and how does he work?"

The man laughed.

"That 's easy. I don't know where he is now and he works like—a coward."

"Was he with you to-night?"

"Now, look here, young feller; nobody 's been infringin' on your property rights, have they? Why don't you wait until your own ox is gored?"

"Somebody certainly has been infringing upon my property rights, but leaving that out of the

THE HOMESTEADERS

question now, what I must know to-night is, as I told you before, a matter of life or death."

"Well, then, you can stop pesterin' yourself about that. Everybody knows that Frank LaDue's a coward. And after to-night, I can tell him he'd better be a-takin' some notice o' you instead o' countin' so much on intimidatin' you. You need never worry about him shootin', though. He'd be afraid o' the dark afterwards. I'm only tellin' you what everybody knows. But he's a great bluffer, Frank LaDue is. He might plug your keyhole, for instance, but he'd never follow it up. He steals from small owners and homesteaders and Injuns. He ain't got the courage to tackle big concerns—usually. The Injuns hate him like pizen and I look for trouble now most any day in that direction, and so far as I can read human nature, he don't love you none, nor that Seven-up fellow, neither. But if he has ever worked with me in anything you will never know it. The law's got me at last but I reckon I can keep my mouth shut about other fellers. Are you satisfied? I would n't have talked half so much to any other man, but you—
are such a comical little slim-shanks to make such a haul as three big lubbers like us. I can't help

HONOR AMONG THIEVES

laughin'—but I'm through now." He closed his mouth stubbornly and turned to the wall. He could not be persuaded to speak again.

The next morning, early, Tom Burrington returned unsuccessful in both his man and horse hunt. Mingled with his honest admiration of his tenderfoot friend's fine showing for his night's work was much astonishment and not a little chagrin. The two men started at once for Westover with their prisoners, where the latter were given into the keeping of the deputy marshal. They waived examination before the United States Commissioner, were bound over to appear at the next regular term of the United States Court at Deadwood, and then Tom and Jack and the little White Slave drove the stolen band of horses home. The real quest of both men had been in vain. This thought stayed with Tom throughout all the long, dusty way, that a thousand horses gone astray could not have taken him so far from Josephine in her hour of danger had he not been so sure that he was about Josephine's business. One of the outlaws had said that La-Due was too much of a coward to shoot. Was not shooting a coward's game?

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRAGEDY AT THE HOMESTEAD

NOTHING of an unusual nature had occurred during the absence of the two men. Tom's mother, acting upon an earnest hint from her big, gray-eyed son who had grown so much more thoughtful and reserved in the year that was just past, and who, since two short days ago, had grown infinitely older, had contrived to keep her guest contented within doors most of the time — an act deserving of much credit, for the girl loved with a great love the wide outdoors.

"We spent such a lazy day yesterday," confessed Josephine, smilingly. "First we made gingerbread men, Louis and I, a whole battalion, thanks to Mrs. Burrington, who was generous with the dough. Then we sewed and sang and read and talked about you when you were a little boy, and about Jack when he was a little boy, and about Louis when he was a little — baby; and this morning, — now what do you suppose we did this morning?"

"I never could guess," said Tom, wondering

THE TRAGEDY

how he ever thought for a moment that Josephine ought to go away when here in his house by the side of his stately, gray-haired mother, she was so safe and merry and seemingly content — so dear a household spirit. Could not he, Tom Burrington, accounted in the range country a man of more than ordinary strength both physical and of the will, protect and hold what was his own? He laughed, looking at her thus, to think that he had ever thought that he could let her go. She should come to his house and to him and then let all the world watch out.

“Don’t tell, Josephine,” urged Louis. “He does n’t deserve to know. He’ll just let ’em freeze again.”

“Why, you have told yourself, chum,” laughed Josephine, merrily. “Besides, anybody could tell by the sunburn on your nose and the freckles on mine that we had been out in the sun all the morning. Well, I will tell you, though, as Louis says, you do not either of you deserve to know. While your mother was getting those pretty slips ready to take the place of the plants that froze last Winter all on account of somebody’s unappreciative carelessness, Louis and I went down to our garden and hoed potatoes all the morning

THE HOMESTEADERS

and weeded the onion bed, and if you do not think of me and of my poor blistered hands every time you taste a potato of the future, you will be an ungrateful wretch and we shall never forgive you, shall we, Louis?"

"I do not see any blisters, my fine lady," said Tom, interestedly. "I have you. You wore gloves. She did—did n't she, Louis?"

"Ask her. How should I know?" said the boy, loyally. "Do you expect a fellow to be for always on the look-out to see whether his women-folks wear gloves or not? Life's too short."

"I should think that you could see for yourself," said Josephine, holding out her hands for inspection. They were not very large hands and they were very white, and Tom, not daring to touch them, but feeling the hot blood burn his face with the desire of it, asked abruptly:

"You did n't go down to the far garden, did you?"

"You bet we did," said Louis, stoutly. "Charlie Mason has n't been able to do a thing down there and it needed fixin' mighty bad. So Josephine and I worked down there all the morning and this afternoon I'm going to teach her

THE TRAGEDY

to shoot my rifle to pay her for working in my garden."

"I could n't help it, Tom," explained the mother, apologetically, as she saw the sternness creeping over the handsome face. "She would go this morning in spite of me. They took hold of hands, the silly children, and just ran away from me. I could not go myself because I did not know where they went, and besides, I had bread in the oven."

"Why should I not go to the garden?" asked Josephine, in troubled surprise.

And Tom, looking long and deep into her clear, questioning eyes, did not dare to tell her why. The shadow of a great unrest fell over his face. He wished in that moment that he had asked her of Jack, yesterday, down by the wood-pile—was it only yesterday?—when the words of his great desire had trembled upon his lips and would have been spoken had he not choked them back because he knew so well that Jack would never give her up while this mysterious evil menaced her. But perhaps if he had tried hard enough, he might have convinced Jack of the entire wisdom of such a course. He wished he had tried. He wished he had spoken to Jack on

THE HOMESTEADERS

the way home from Westover. Jack almost believed what the horse-thief had said about La-Due's art of bluffing. Yet he had known that it would not be worth while to speak, then, because, while Jack almost believed the horse-thief's rough reading of the islander's character and intentions, he did not believe it — altogether, and Tom knew that Jack Carroll would never listen to his or any man's suit until the question was settled one way or the other. He might even, and probably would, only bring about a loss of fellowship by his undue haste. He knew all of this well, and yet — if Jack only would! Yes, why not? Why should Josephine not go to the garden — to his garden? If she could not, if the very thought of it brought the cold damp to his forehead, then indeed was the time come when she must go away. His dream had been the idle dream of a fool's paradise.

"There is no reason at all why you should not go," he answered, quietly, "except that a regular den of rattle-snakes infests that locality. You must promise me that you will never go away down there alone."

"I should think that it would be a very simple matter to kill all those rattle-snakes," said Jose-

THE TRAGEDY

phine, unsuspectingly. "If I were a man, I should do it. I should think you would be afraid for Louis. What with wolves and rattle-snakes, I very plainly foresee an exciting, if hampered, future for Josephine Carroll. Yes, I promise, if you will trust Louis and his gun to me this afternoon," she bargained. "He complains that the stern, elder brother never lets him take his gun out unless attended by this same tyrant. I will send him safely home in the morning. Is it a bargain?"

"It is a bargain," agreed Tom.

Shortly after noon of that same day, having first sent the White Slave out with the cattle, Jack was planting and harrowing corn in a field long neglected because of his inability to get help. He kept doggedly at the task all through the long, hot afternoon, while Josephine and her young guest amused themselves near by with shooting at humps of turned-over sod for targets, or bunches of soap-weed. Sometimes they tried their luck at a flock of visiting blackbirds, having no intention of really hitting anything that was alive. Indeed, they would have been sorely remorseful had a feathered and make-belief target inadvertently fallen. At least, Josephine would

THE HOMESTEADERS

have been, and the boy was bound in honor to support the views of his pretty young hostess on this day when he was not only her guest but her sworn protector as well. Tom had said so and it meant something when Tom spoke. How he listened and longed for the warning rattle of a snake so that he might prove his position as not honorary only, but urgently active as well. He even threshed through the prairie grass with his chubby and rubber-booted legs in the vain hope of surprising the enemy in his lair, never dreaming of failure to kill.

When the shadows of the trees had stretched themselves near halfway across the river, when the sun hung over the western hills and shone with a yellower light, when the frogs began chanting their raucous monotones, when the meadow lark's liquid notes had taken on a plaintive tone and the "bob white" of the quail, calling to his brooding mate, came sleepily from grass coverts, and the soft, heart-breaking lament of the mourning dove floated with penetrating sweetness from the depths of the island forest, when, if one listened, one could hear the deep, steady push of the river, Josephine waved a cheery good-bye to the laborer in the field, who

THE TRAGEDY

held his hat high to honor the passing of the blue-ginghamed figure, held out her hand to the boy, and the two strolled leisurely homeward to prepare the evening meal for the man who must work while yet there was light.

"I am tired, Josephine, dead tired," said Jack, after supper. He sat down on the threshold and leaned his head wearily against the door-casing. It was a characteristic attitude of his that Spring and Summer when he was tired or thoughtful. His eyes were lifted to the hilltops, as they had so often been before, where the light yet lingered, although dusk had come to the valley.

"Poor boy," comforted Josephine. "You work far too hard. It was n't fair of Mr. Burrington to keep you up all last night, either. Was it, Louis?"

"No, I suppose not, only I do wish I had been there, too," sighed the boy. "Gee! Maybe Jack would have let me take their guns away from 'em, — maybe. What 'll you bet? Would n't you, Jack? Because there was n't a speck of danger. You had the drop on 'em all the time, you know."

"But where the fun without any danger at all?" laughed Jack.

"Well, of course," qualified the boy, "they

THE HOMESTEADERS

might have drawn so quickly as to hurt me even if you had killed 'em' afterwards. Say, Jack, I wish you'd let me work for you. I'm a bully hand at makin' garden and tendin' to stock. You just ask Tom. And I could learn to plough and cultivate corn and things. I'd love to. Maybe if you needed me, and Josephine, too, mummy would let me stay out here all Winter. I hate to go back to that old Chicago and that old school now that I know you and Josephine. Josephine makes the best biscuits I ever ate in my life. Mummy says it 's because she was born in the South. She says you get a knack by being born down there. I wish our old cook had gone down there to be born. Josephine, are you going to have sour milk batter cakes for breakfast? I like 'em even better than biscuits for breakfast —when you make 'em," he concluded, diplomatically.

"Thanks, old chap," said Jack, a laugh in his eyes, "but now that I have the White Slave to help around, I won't need your labor. However, you are dead welcome to stay here all the time if you like. By the way, I wonder what keeps the boy? It's away past milking time. Any mail, Josephine?"

THE TRAGEDY

"Lots of it," said Josephine, interestedly. "The home papers, and letters, too, and the magazines, and I have n't read a word. Was n't I good to wait for you? Charlie Mason, that Seven-up cowboy, you know, went to town early this morning and he said he would bring our mail. Shall I light the lamp and read the news to you?"

"Please," said Jack, yawning. "It seems a shame to have a light this fine evening, but we shall have to have the news, I suspect."

Josephine arose, lighted a lamp, set it upon the table, leisurely drew up a chair, sat down and slipped a finger through the wrapping of a newspaper. Opposite, chin in hand, elbows on the table, sat the boy Louis, prepared to give his earnest attention to the reading of the news of a far-away country.

"Do you want to do something for me first, Louis?" asked Jack. "Just bring me a basin of cold water, will you? My poor feet burn like sixty. They are not exactly at home yet in plough shoes—never mind, Jo, don't look so overcome. A better time is coming. Anyway, they'll get used to it. It is only a question of time when my pretty feet won't have even a bowing acquaintance with a calf and will be too calloused

THE HOMESTEADERS

even for reminiscence. This is a world of adaptability, you know," he went on, with his old, whimsical smile. "You are a good boy, Louis. Thank you. Gee! That feels good! Drink it in, poor feet, for you have to go again to-morrow. Fire ahead, Jo. So the old place is to be sold again. I thought Uncle Geoffrey would have to do that sooner or later. I would not go back, though, for all the world, would you, Jo? This is a right glorious country and we are here to stay. Heigho, but I am tired!"

He clasped his hands behind his head as he had done that night when he found Onjijitka sitting late with Josephine. There was a sudden, sharp report, a piercing scream, darkness, and the slim, tired body of John Calhoun Carroll, late a gentleman of Carolina, sank softly to the floor, while without many stars began to twinkle in the darkening sky, and drearily across the quiet country came the yelping of the coyotes.

"Josephine! I am shot!"

It was the boy who spoke, a great horror in his breaking voice.

"Where, dear? Do not be afraid," called Josephine, soothingly, as she groped her way around the table and took the rigid little figure

THE TRAGEDY

in her arms. "Where, dearie, where are you hurt?"

"I don't know, Josephine," sobbed the boy, clinging to her in a passion of uncontrollable terror. "It came through the window."

"But when you screamed, where did it hurt you? Jack, why do you not come? Our boy has been shot. Oh, Louis, you must tell me where you are hurt. I cannot find a match. Jack! Jack!"

No answer broke the hush that followed this passionate appeal.

"Why, dear boy," said Josephine, then, in a sweet, strained voice, "you are not hurt at all. It is Jack. Do not sob so. I tell you it is Jack. Do you not see? Jack does not move. He is there by the door. I must shut that door or they will shoot him again." She rose to her feet unsteadily, supporting herself with her hand on the table. "Come, Louis, we must shut the door."

"It came through the window, Josephine," repeated the boy.

"But I must shut the door," persisted Josephine.

Very quietly she slipped forward, very quietly

THE HOMESTEADERS

put her arms around the shoulders of the boyish figure lying there so still, and gently lifted it wholly within, so that the bare white feet of him who had gone no longer rested upon the cold, hard stone of the doorway—those bare, white feet that never again would follow the unaccustomed harrow, or be bruised by the harsh leather of plough shoes. It is a glorious country, poor Jack, but the price of it was many a fair young life like yours and many a heart-ache like Josephine's. When Josephine had closed the door softly, she crept back to the boy.

"Get your rifle," she whispered. "He is down at the woodpile—I saw him—and I know him—he will kill you, too, and me, Louis, if we do not kill him first. Quick!"

"Is Jack—"

"Yes, dear, Jack is dead," she said, in a strange, quiet voice. "Get your gun so that we may kill that man out there, and then go for help."

Help! It was the slogan that sounded the rally to Tom Burrington's brother. It was then that his sturdy little soul, so peculiarly akin to that of the elder brother, leaped from the shackles of its own fear and never again, throughout all

THE TRAGEDY

the long watches of that night of terror, did he fail this girl whom Tom loved.

"Let me shoot, Josephine," he said, biting his lips desperately in his effort to keep them steady. "You don't know how, and besides it's a man's work. No, Josephine, we mustn't have a light. They saw too plainly before. They shot through the window, you know."

But Josephine took the rifle from the small hands that would have clung to it, saying simply:

"I must do it. Jack would if he could—but he cannot—so I must. I promised Tom to take care of you."

She crept again to the door, opened it slightly, turned the unaccustomed weapon toward the dark blur of the woodpile, and fired. The gun dropped from her nerveless hands to the floor.

"He was n't there, Louis," she said, pitifully. "He is hiding somewhere. We shall have to stay until he goes away."

She felt for a match, found one at last and lighted the lamp, which smoked distressingly, with its chimney scattered in fragments over the table and floor. The quick-witted boy hastily drew the blinds close and then Josephine, sitting upon the floor, took upon her lap the head of the

THE HOMESTEADERS

boy that was dead. In the half light, his face was serene and it seemed as if he smiled. It was a brave soul that had said he was here to stay, and now—he was already gone. But he had left in his stead the grace of a smile, half humorous, wholly accepting, of one who, however unexpectedly, had met and known and rebelled not weakly against the master of all the world—death. But if death be the master of all the world, why, then, as Josephine gazed on the still face in that solemn hour, that haunting air of mysterious triumph around the boyish mouth? Was it that, beyond the world, death had met its master?

Josephine had no will to do aught but look upon that face as the time dragged heavily away. There was nothing else in all the world but Jack, and now that he was gone, what did anything matter? Only she was very glad that she had worn gloves in the garden that morning because now her hands were soft to touch the smooth white forehead—very white at the edge of the thick brown hair, but shading into tan above the closed eyes. Rosebud was coming to-morrow for a visit and she wondered idly what the Indian girl would say when she came to the ranch of the

THE TRAGEDY

Broken Key and knocked, and there would be no one to say, "Come in." For of course she, Josephine, would be killed before morning. If not, Jack would come back for her. He would never leave his little sister alone—never. She could trust Jack. Would Onji, as Jack loved to call her, open the door and enter unbidden? Yes, for the key was broken and any one could come in who wanted to. There would be no one to keep any one out anyway—to-morrow. Poor little Rosebud! It would be very lonely for her in the time to come. There would be nowhere for her to go, any more, to have change from the slothful life in the home of Two Hawks. She would go back to the Dakotahs and never try to be white any more. But why not? It was such a lonesome world without one's own people. She, Josephine, could not bear it alone, so she was going back to her own—Jack was coming for her pretty soon now—so why should not poor, lonely, passionate, striving, slighted Rosebud go back and stay with her own? Two Hawks was a very good man, and nothing matters in all the world but one's own. Everything else is emptiness. One finds that out when one comes to die. But Rosebud would be very lonely

THE HOMESTEADERS

for a while. Generous-hearted Jack had been good to her, and she had tried to be, too. Would she cry? No, that was not her nature. She would just steal away again softly and go to the Seven-up, maybe, and then Tom would come and he was so big and strong that he would just pick them both up and lay them on the bed and then he would wonder where Louis was—why, where was Louis?

And then it was as if Josephine's heart really broke, for she knew that she could not stay there any longer with the dear body of Jack; that she must no longer sit there and wait for Jack to come back. She knew that she must arise and go to the little boy who was so bravely quiet, but over whose sensitive young face hung the gray shadow of an awful horror. She laid the dear head upon the floor and stood up, pressing her hands just once against her eyes, where hot tears had sprung because the floor was so hard. Then she asked, steadily:

“Is he gone, Louis?”

“I don't know, Josephine. I have not heard anything,” he answered, his heart leaping at the sound of a human voice again.

“One of us will have to go and one of us will

THE TRAGEDY

have to stay," said Josephine, in even, constrained tones. "Which would you rather do, go or stay?"

"I don't care, Josephine, honest. Which would you rather do?"

"I do not know what to do. I cannot leave you and I cannot send you." Her voice died away drearily.

"I am not afraid of Jack," fabricated the boy, "and I am not afraid to go, either. Maybe the man is gone."

Josephine shook her head.

"No, dear," she said, resolutely, though often the sweet voice broke, "we'll both go. Jack is dead. They can do nothing more to him. I promised to take care of you, so we'll go together, you and I."

With something to do, a sad courage and strength had come back to her. She did not look again at the quiet form, but hurriedly blew out the smoking light, took firm hold of Louis' rifle, and held out her hand to the boy.

"We must climb out of the bedroom window," she said.

"But he shot through there," remonstrated the boy, who was never to forget the awfulness of

THE HOMESTEADERS

that shot through the window when the bullet had whistled past him so close that he thought it had found him.

"I know, but I saw the man afterwards down by the woodpile, so we cannot go by the door," decided Josephine. "Come into the bedroom. We will get out at that window."

Noiselessly, they crept to the bedroom window, raised it softly, and peered out. It was very dark—so dark that Josephine caught her breath with the thought of daring it. The air was still, warm, oppressive, and hard to breathe. A storm was coming. They heard the mutter of distant thunder following a bright flash of lightning that showed huge masses of black and angry clouds drifting rapidly up from the west, and that left the hovering, waiting gloom the murkier and the more insistent because of the brief illumination. The storm would break soon. They must hasten. A new thought came to Josephine. She groped her way to the rude closet, felt resolutely among Jack's belongings until she found coat and trousers, and then she quickly changed her own clothes for those that had been Jack's.

"We can run better," she whispered, "and my skirt will not always be catching on something,

THE TRAGEDY

and maybe they will be afraid of me because they will think that I am a man."

She pushed the boy gently aside.

"I must go first, chum," she said.

Ah, God! What was that? Was it the guarded snap of a trigger struck into place for deadly readiness? And had the faint rustling of the grass that preceded it been caused by the stealthy haste of a man to be on time? There was no wind to disturb the grass. Or was it the first sigh of the storm? She climbed frantically back into the room, shot wildly two or three times out of the window, and then, panting with terror, leaned against the wall.

"We shall have to stay all night," she said, chokingly. "He is out there. He won't let us get away. We must keep shooting, Louis, all the time. We must never stop. We must let him know that we are not utterly helpless and at his mercy. Have you lots of cartridges? We must not waste them. We must put some aside for—an emergency."

They did keep shooting all the night long, just to let some one out there in the dark and the storm know that they were not utterly helpless and at his mercy—they, a stricken girl and a little child,

THE HOMESTEADERS

to whom the wild, electrical storm with its beating rain and the roar and crash of its thunder came like heavy cannonading from an answering enemy. They shot through the doorway, through the shattered west window, through the bedroom window, and then through the doorway again, and so the weary round—twice and thrice and countless times, till the first creeping gray of the early dawn outlined the hill summits and the tops of the taller trees on the island while the valleys and the lower thickets remained yet a menacing, haunted blur of black. Then hand in hand they watched at the window. The storm had been brief, though furious, and had long since died away. When the near thickets began faintly but surely to show form and substance and the light of the eastern hills took on rose tints, Josephine led the boy to the inner room and made him lie down to rest for an hour, and soon, spent with fear and fatigue, he slept. But Josephine did not sleep, and when it was entirely light and there was no one to be seen in all the lonely land, she awakened the boy. The window stood wide open.

“It is better—slip through this way and run, dear boy, run. You must not be afraid. No one

THE TRAGEDY

will dare hurt you, Tom Burrington's brother. It is day, too. Do you hear me? You are not to be afraid. Now go, dear."

"Poor Josephine," said Louis, slipping his arms around her neck for a quick embrace. "How white you are and how tired! I will run all the way, so it won't be long. Are you sure that you are not afraid? Had n't I better stay?"

"Yes, Louis, I am afraid," said Josephine, with a smile, the exceeding pathos of which the boy never forgot, "but I am more afraid to go and leave you—and we cannot go together now—it is too late. You must not be seen with poor Josephine Carroll any more, for she is Jack's sister, you know. So please hurry, won't you, chum?"

Closing the window after the boy as he slipped away into the chill of the early morning, Josephine crept back to watch by Jack alone.

CHAPTER XIV

THE NEXT MORNING

JOSEPHINE was tired. A deadly weariness held the muscles of her arms and shoulders in a thralldom the chains of which the sight of the murderer himself peering in at the fatal west window could not have broken. Those firm-fleshed young arms had done well when the need of them had been insistent; when all night long, death had sat brooding over the little isolated house in the valley. But with the cool first light of the June morning came a relaxation of the tense muscles and a strange apathy of the brain which engendered a woful loss of nerve force. The time passed unaccounted for; time during which Josephine, sitting on the floor, stared dumbly into space; time during which she could not have lifted a hand in self-defence though the summons had left her no alternative but instant death, and though Louis' rifle lay close to her feet; time during which the sun swung higher and higher up into the deep blue of the Dakota sky, and the mournful low of the milch

THE NEXT MORNING

cows, calling Jack, beat distressfully upon her ears although she heard it not for what it meant.

Finally she arose, mechanically changed her clothes, and resumed her position upon the floor. She was sitting thus when Tom came. She heard nothing of the hoof beats on the sod, nothing of the clamor of that wild ride nor the heavy breathing of the hard-ridden horse dragged to a stand-still, without the hint of a slowing-down, so that when the door was thrown open, she shuddered softly, bewilderedly, with an unreasoning dread of supernatural visitation.

“Josephine!”

Louis had told him. He knew that he should find Jack lying there dead and that Josephine would be sitting hopelessly and drearily close by. The sadness of that which he saw now with his actual eyes, he had seen with his inner vision all the way while he rode like the wind, triple-guised, a saint of relief, a devil of vengeance, justice incarnate. He had just entered the living room for the early breakfast which prevailed at the Seven-up in the summer-time, when the child, utterly exhausted, white with fatigue, tear-streaked and travel-stained, stumbled into the room from the front entrance. The unspeakable relief which

THE HOMESTEADERS

the sight of the broad-shouldered, flannel-shirted, keen-eyed, self-confident man who was his big brother brought to the sorely tried boy, was too much for his self-control and he began to sob abandonedly, standing by the door and making no effort to come further within. Tom understood then and yet he stayed a moment to listen to the boy's broken story, and stayed yet a moment longer to put the child in his mother's arms, and then, nothing short of Omnipotence could have stayed him longer. Yet all he could say was, "Josephine!" He repeated it helplessly, "Josephine!"

"I am glad it is you," said Josephine, in a quiet little voice. "I did not hear you coming. Did Louis tell you?"

"Yes, he told me," said Tom, huskily. He strode forward, seized the cold hands in his warm clasp and lifted her strongly to her feet.

"Come, Josephine," he said, almost roughly. "You must not sit there any longer. There is too much to do. Have you had any breakfast?"

She shook her head drearily while the first tears that had come to her eyes since she laid Jack's head on the hard floor stood there now because she could not understand this terrible new

THE NEXT MORNING

sternness of Tom's. What had she done that he should speak to her thus? She began to sob childishly. She had thought that when Tom came much of her trouble would be over because he was so big and capable—he would help her to bear it—and instead, he was scolding her—and why? Was it because of Louis?

“I did n't know what else to do,” she pleaded.

“What are you talking about?” asked Tom, sharply.

“About Louis, you know. I promised you that no harm should come to him and I did try to make my words come true. But I could not leave him, could I? I thought that it would be so terrible for a little child to stay here all alone with— with — And I could not go with him because they would have killed him, too, if he had been seen with Jack's sister. So I let him go alone. I am sorry. I did not mean to do wrong.”

“Josephine, if you do not keep still, you will kill me,” said Tom, brokenly. “I thank my God that you were not alone. I shall be a better man always for this, that He did not let you be altogether alone—even if there was no one to help you but a little child. My girl, what made you think of such a monstrous thing?”

THE HOMESTEADERS

"You were so cross," she said, despondently.

The man gripped himself hard. She seemed so utterly helpless standing there by the unresponsive body of the one man in all the world who had authority over her, so young and fair and sweet, and yet because of her great sorrow, so far removed from his lover's touch, that he must crucify the imperious demands of his whole being to crush her in his arms and comfort her there. Had he been harsh with her? If he had, it was because of the fierce longing that was in him, that was so hard to control.

"I did not mean to be," he said, gently.

"I know it," she said, smiling sadly. She was stronger now and knew that while it was good to have him there and that he would know how to do the things that had to be done, yet her trouble she must bear alone—forever. She knew now that there was no other way. "I am very tired and I did not understand just for a minute. Forgive me. What shall I do now?"

As her hint of a cry for help had been the younger brother's call to rally last night, so Josephine's complete dependence upon him made Tom his own man again now. Quietly but purposefully he went about the duty that lay before

THE NEXT MORNING

him. Stepping into the next room, he robbed the scarcely disturbed bed of its upper covering and returning, spread it reverently over the body of his friend. Then searching for and quickly finding a big tin cup, he left the house, to return shortly with the cup brimming with fresh milk which he commanded her to drink. She obeyed, too weary to resist his dominant will.

"Now, Josephine," he said, earnestly, "I shall have to leave you for a little while. Do not worry. I shall come back just as soon as I can. It will not take me long. Do not leave the house. You will remember that, won't you? Do not be afraid that anything will happen to me. I will be back in ten minutes. Do you understand?"

Yes, she understood. There was no fear but that she understood, poor Josephine.

"Must you go? Is there no other way? Must I be left alone again?"

He put his arm for one moment around the slight, drooping shoulders while she read the hard, inevitable truth in his pitying eyes, and then hastily left the house.

He crossed the bed of the slough dry-shod, though with some difficulty, as the river was rapidly rising, and went directly to Frank LaDue's

THE HOMESTEADERS

cabin on the island. There was no one there. At least no one responded to his peremptory summons. He had not thought to find any one at home and yet he kept one hand very near to his pistol belt while he unceremoniously thrust open the door and entered unbidden. Convinced that the house was deserted, he was on the point of leaving when something over by the bed attracted his attention. He stared meditatively at a pair of rough, half-worn shoes, the plough and harrow kind, not the dapper riding boots of the cowboy, and they were caked with yellow mud not yet altogether dry. They interested him, these shoes, and yet he must not waste time upon them. He proceeded quickly to the stable and corral. There was no one there. He glanced at the sun. It was high time that the proper authorities be called into action and assistance rendered to Josephine. He longed greatly to pursue his investigations relentlessly to the inexorable end, when he should stand face to face with Jack's murderer. But there was Josephine. Too much time had been frittered away already. If only he had waited at the Seven-up long enough for his mother to accompany him! He gazed longingly into the depths of the forest to the

THE NEXT MORNING

north. How close together grew the trees and how massive the trunks of many! He knew that most of the cowboys around cherished the belief that the unbranded calves from the Indian herds were systematically driven from the Reservation into the seclusion of this heavy timber here to remain until such time as the lord of the domain deemed it wise to remove them to the open. Surely the belief was a well-grounded one. It would give him a lively satisfaction to penetrate that leafy labyrinth, if only there were not such crying need of him elsewhere. But, after all, it would be foolhardy to attempt to run down a man—or men—in that unknown wilderness where a clever fugitive, forewarned, might elude one enemy for days at a time and all the while be silently laughing behind some gigantic cottonwood where, if the mood struck him, he could end his pursuer's days of searching by the simple jar of a little steel hammer. And then what would become of Josephine? He turned away resolutely and would not heed the bright-eyed, saucy squirrels that seemed, cunningly, to try to lure him farther and farther within the dim forest. He retraced his steps and reëntered the house.

“I am going to town now, Josephine,” he said,

THE HOMESTEADERS

gravely. "I shall not be gone long. You must not be afraid. There is no one anywhere around the premises — neither here nor on the island. I could not go and leave you alone until I had satisfied myself thoroughly that there was no one. I — hate to leave you, but as you say, there is no other way. Why, Josephine, you look different. Have you dressed again?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Yes," she said, "for I have found another way. I must go and you must stay."

True. She had taken advantage of Tom's absence to change her pretty gingham house gown for her riding habit. She was dressed for out-of-doors even to her gauntletted riding gloves. She was very pale, her lips were pressed tightly together, and her dark eyes were haunted with shadows that were destined to come and go as long as life lasted; otherwise, she seemed perfectly composed and self-reliant.

He did not acquiesce readily. In truth, he disputed her intention vehemently, but, "Mr. Burrington," she asked, unexpectedly, "do you believe that they are satisfied with Jack's death alone?"

He was taken completely by surprise and utterly confounded for the moment. He hesitated

THE NEXT MORNING

in troubled doubt. Was it possible that she, too, was connecting the gulch incident with last night? "Tell me, Mr. Burrington," she insisted, her eyes beginning to shine with a feverish brilliance, "am I exempt, or is it annihilation? Tell me, for I must know."

He bowed his head for a moment while his struggle lasted. It was very bitter for a man of Burrington's make to let a girl ride away into action that at best was fraught with peril while he remained with folded hands behind. But anything was better than to leave her here alone where so many things might happen. Was it not true that Josephine, too, was proscribed? It would be criminal inefficiency to refuse to take into consideration the man's probable return to complete his work. The thought was unbearable. Josephine would be far, far safer in the wide outdoors with a fast horse and a good rifle.

"I do not know," she said, steadily. "It has come to me just now that I have sometimes thought you knew something that you would not tell us. Who knows? Maybe, if you had —" she hesitated, trembling violently. "But however that may be, I must go now." She stepped to the door and opened it.

THE HOMESTEADERS

Tom turned his haggard face away for a moment and gazed silently out of the window. There was a terrible pain in his heart that spread to his eyes and burned them and struggled doggedly for the mastery of his self-control.

"You are right," he said at last, quietly. "It is better for you to go. But I shall go with you."

"And leave—him—alone?" she asked, with a touch of scorn.

"Then you must go alone," he said, with an effort. "Come, we have lost too much time already."

His horse stood patiently at the door, the bridle rein trailing to the ground. Quickly, resourcefully, he shortened the stirrups. "You will ride my horse," he said, with cold authority. "He is all ready and besides he is the longest-winded and fastest horse on the range." He slipped his arm through the bridle rein and started for the river, Josephine following blindly. Arrived at the boat landing, they found the ferry gone; but the light skiff was there tugging away unweariedly at its safe moorings, rebelliously desirous of floating away with the swift current.

"Well, he will just have to swim," said Tom, tersely.

THE NEXT MORNING

Holding the boat steady with one hand, he held out the other to Josephine. After a momentary hesitation, she gave him her hand and stepped into the boat.

"You will have to sit in the stern and lead the horse," said Tom. "I am sorry to make you do this, but he might not follow docilely, at least until we strike the middle of the river." He handed the reins to Josephine, sprang into the boat, seized the oars and pushed off.

On the far shore, gravely kind despite his heartache, he lifted her into the saddle and fitted his own rifle across the saddle horn.

"Do not spare the horse," he said. "Only be careful not to cripple him before you reach the uplands. Give him his head and he will not fail you. Good-bye, Josephine."

Tom Burrington watched the blue-clad figure until it disappeared up the Gap; then he returned to the straining boat and rowed back across the yellow river to take his turn at watching alone.

CHAPTER XV

THE LONG CHASE

ONCE safely upon the plateau surrounded only by unobstructed distances and the soft, rare, sun-shot atmosphere that touched her like a benediction after her long night of murk and horror, Josephine's fear fell away from her. She rode rapidly but not constrainedly. Jack would be well cared for now and she was so tired. There was all the time in the world and a long life to live alone. She must never hurry what she had to do any more because, when the things were all done, what would she do then? There was so much time that had to be lived through. She was stronger than she had been last night and knew that it was only a delirious though pleasing phantasy of a bewildered brain that had deceived her into the belief that Jack would come back to her. She knew to-day that she would have to live her life—without Jack. It would be a very long life, too, because she was so young and very strong. She could not remember having ever been really ill since the old days of the measles and the

THE LONG CHASE

whooping cough. She was not the kind who might pine away and die of heart-break. She should just have to live it out—alone—there was no help for her—the last of her race—just a lonely girl with nowhere to go. After a while, a long, dreary, barren while, she would be a white-haired, sad-eyed old woman—still with nowhere to go. She did not see how she could bear it—but she should just have to—there was no other way.

And then for some vague, indefinable reason, she turned her head and glanced back over the road she had just come. It stretched behind her straight and level and rain-freshened, but she was no longer alone upon it. What was there so hauntingly familiar in the pose of the man riding so rapidly her way? She hesitated for a moment, gazing earnestly backward. His horse seemed to be clearing the ground in great leaps. Suddenly the truth came to her in a sickening sense of comprehension. He was the man with the baby blue eyes whom she had recognized last night lurking around the wood yard of the Broken Key—and he had dared to give chase after her on the high road. Ah, God! Would this terrible nightmare never end? She pressed her pale lips close to-

THE HOMESTEADERS

gether, leaned low in the saddle, and gave the horse his head with a whispered word in his ear as she had been wont to speak to Long Chase. Long Chase! What was it that Jack had said once about the "long chase"? She shuddered because it had come and she had not her own. Was it an evil omen that, when the time was come, Long Chase should be peacefully grazing many miles away?

Yet it was a good horse she rode and he ran with head low and with long, loping strides that measured off the land in regular and telling distances; but the speed of her horse was to be of no advantage. She heard the report of a rifle and the whistle of a bullet as it passed in close proximity to her. She had lingered too long pondering the long, dreary years that stretched out before her into such an infinity of unendingness, and now her life was to be cut off short as Jack's had been, without time for reconstructing her outlook, without choice or appeal. Moreover, she was to be shot down in malicious, unreasoning play. Jack was a man and as such had been big game worthy the unremitting zeal and changeless purpose of the huntsman; but just because she was a no-account, friendless girl, troublesome

THE LONG CHASE

only by reason of her relationship to Jack, she was to be shot down in the ruthless, inconsequential way of the sportsman, who, after having successfully stalked his big game, picks off a gopher or a blue bird or a harmless owl, for no reason at all except an overflow of exuberant and wanton spirits. Was there any other reason why any one should desire to kill her? Well, and why not? The years were long—Jack was dead. Half-unconsciously, she drew rein. Let the end come now. It was far, far better so. She and Jack could go together, after all. Nothing else was worth while, so of what use this blind struggle for mere life—life that would be too hard to live even if she won it? Death by the bullet was easy—that is—it would be only a second or two and Jack had borne it. She could bear it, too. Why should she, a girl, presume to be the last of a race noted through generations for its gallant men? She heard another shot and the whir of another bullet.

Suddenly the blood rushed to her colorless face, the insane stare of the brown eyes into the unrevealed mysteries of another world gave way to a warm human look of firm resolve, and once again Tom's horse bounded over the road making the

THE HOMESTEADERS

best run of his life and with an evil light in his eye for the presumptuous cayuse who had dared to gain so many leagues during the temporary aberration of mind of his strange rider whose slightest behest he instinctively obeyed, however unwillingly. Perhaps there was something in the pressure of the knees and in the feel of the bit that told him he must — that though his burden was light it was masterful.

Ay! Jack was dead; but the slayer of him was not and while he lived, Josephine would live, too. The reaction had come. There would be time enough and to spare for her to try to find a way to live the long years when Jack's murderer had been made to drink to the bitter dregs the cup which was "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

She had accomplished about twelve miles of her journey when she turned to find herself pursued. Soon the road swerved sharply around a grove of trees planted years ago by a man who had dreamed dreams but who had not had the courage of them and had retraced his way to the nearer but more limited opportunities of an older civilization. The place was now deserted save for birds and wild prairie creatures. On the far

THE LONG CHASE

side, Josephine dismounted, led the horse well within the shelter of the trees and tied him securely. She should have need of him—afterwards, and so there must be no possibility of the animal's abandoning her in a sudden fright. She was quite calm and made her plans collectedly, taking up her own station behind a huge straight-trunked cottonwood and waiting. She realized fully that her position would not be tenable long should she fail in her purpose. There were no more turns on the road to Velpen. He could see that she was not on it. It was sweet and quiet and cool here under the trees after the rain; and there was a home-like, woodsy smell, faint but true, because of the dampened foliage that had lain there many years. If he would only just pass on and leave her unmolested! Presently then, she would slip out and continue her journey to town and let him whose right it was, and whose duty, do for the murderer what there was to be done. But in her heart she knew that he would not pass on.

The iron-shod feet were coming very near now. Just a moment and they would round the point. But how long that moment was! Long since it seemed to her that it must have passed and still

THE HOMESTEADERS

she heard and could not see. How regular and rhythmical the hoof-beats were, pounding along on the hardened earth whose surface only had been thinly affected by last night's storm! She put her free hand to her throat. She had an almost uncontrollable inclination to scream aloud in hysteria. Why did he not come? She wondered irrelevantly if her pretty hair would be found to be gray-streaked when this was all over. He came at last, his horse lathered with the heat of the chase. The man with the baby blue eyes evidently had not thought of let or hindrance, for he swung around the angle without diminution of speed. There was even something of triumph in the sweep of his unguarded curve toward the new prospective, as if insolently assured that now the end was very near. He glanced down the road and made a movement as though to stop his horse. It was at that moment Josephine shot. Not in vain had been Louis' painstaking effort to teach his friend of his own newly acquired and proudly shared knowledge of firearms only the day before; for the man lurched forward in his saddle and fell prone to the ground.

For a moment the world turned dark to Josephine and she leaned heavily against the tree for

THE LONG CHASE

support. She had killed the slayer of her brother! Would the nightmare never end? But she could not leave him out there in the road alone for the pitiless sun to beat upon and the rollicking prairie wind to sport with. Now that he was dead, a strange pity for him surged up in her woman's heart. The horse was standing perfectly still where he had so abruptly halted when his rider had fallen at his feet. Tremblingly, Josephine approached. He seemed very young lying so helplessly there, his eyes closed and one arm thrown out between the horse's feet where a step would have trampled it into the earth. Stooping, she gathered the big, inert shoulders within her arms, overcoming by a tremendous effort of will the sudden violent repugnance that laid hold of her when she remembered for whom she had so short a time before performed a like service. She laid him down in the shade of the cottonwood whose leaves were quivering and rustling one against another with a lonesome sound, and then with a little sob of relief she turned to her horse. But she paused irresolute, her hand on the bridle rein, a new horror dawning upon her face. What was it, that faint, far-away sound, so distant when first it arrested her

THE HOMESTEADERS

attention but growing more and more distinct — so rapid, so regular, so insistent? Was it the beat of other hoofs upon the sod? Was Frank LaDue coming to gloat over the culmination of his heinous plots? Or was it a dream sound, that running, pounding, louder-growing, heart-clutching clamor that would break and subside into vague echoes of unreality only when she might struggle free from the nightmare that had haunted her all night? She crept close to Tom's horse for companionship, and in numbed dread waited.

CHAPTER XVI

ONJIJITKA'S LAMENT

ANOTHER girl was sitting on the floor by Jack when Tom returned to the house—Onjijitka, the half-breed girl; but this girl sprang up quickly and faced him with defiance as if she had been caught in mischief and expected censure. In her attitude, there was something also of a startled wild creature at bay and there was corroboration in her stammering words of excuse.

“He—he—was all alone and I was watching by him for Josephine’s sake.”

It was a pitiful subterfuge—there in the presence of all that was mortal of the man who had been a good friend to her—and in her soul she felt it to be unworthy. Better, far better, humiliation in the sight of this arrogant rancher than repudiation—here—of that which was the highest and best thing she had ever known. She could never speak of it again afterward, never stoop to explain, this she knew, but here and now it was like cheating the dead—the beloved dead—to even act a lie; besides she was a woman of the Dakotahs and it was her right

THE HOMESTEADERS

to mourn aloud for the brave who had gone. So she threw back her head with a gesture of pride and looked at the intruder squarely while in her sombre black eyes glowed the mysteries of the most sacred thing of two races met in one.

"He was not like any man I ever knew before," she said.

This was Onjijitka's lament for the dead. Thus began and ended her public mourning. She had held to her racial instinct to cry aloud her grief; she had not lied to the spirit that was gone. Never again did she break her sealed reticence and speak of that which was in the heart of her heart as she had spoken to Tom Burrington of the Seven-up by the side of the dead man. But henceforth she was always solitary, growing more silent and reserved as time went on, and liking much to slip away by herself somewhere on the wide prairie and listen all day long, perhaps, to the whispering grass and the singing wind, trying to attune her mortal ear to the secrets they were forever trying to tell.

"Who has done this thing, Rosebud?" asked Tom, presently, when he had succeeded in swallowing the lump in his throat that had suddenly thrust itself there for Rosebud's sake.

ONJIJITKA'S LAMENT

"Frank LaDue," she answered unhesitatingly.

"What makes you think so?"

"You think so, too, don't you?" counter-questioned the girl.

"Yes, I am afraid that I do," said Tom, slowly.

"I know — what I know," said Rosebud, enigmatically. "Where is Josephine?"

"She has gone to town for help."

"And you let her go?" accused Rosebud.

"I could not help it, Rosebud. She is safer in the open than here, and some one had to go."

"I could have taken care of her," said she.

"But I did not know that you were coming. I should not have let her go had I known."

Frowningly, Rosebud gazed out at the open door and it was as if she were listening to something afar off. Tom watched her silently and wondered about many things in that brief while, but about one thing most of all. Had Jack loved this lithe-limbed, beautiful maid of the Dakotahs? That was something he could never know.

"I am afraid for Josephine," said Rosebud, at last, turning to him and speaking thoughtfully. "What if he should take after her? He hates Josephine. He calls her names—as he does me. The night he stole the cow, you know, he

THE HOMESTEADERS

called her names. I heard him. I am afraid for Josephine."

"There was no one at home on the island," said Tom, soberly. "I ascertained that the first thing this morning."

Rosebud shrugged her shoulders.

"Not at home, maybe, but not far away, I'll warrant you. Come, let us see if the boat is still there."

They left the house together, carefully closing the door behind them, and hastened down to the shore. There was a light wind blowing. They could hear it in the treetops. The water lapping the bank and sucking away the sand made a gentle, dreamy sound suggestive of solitude and unread mysteries. There was no other sound to break the summer stillness. The two stared at one another blankly.

"It's gone, Rosebud," said Tom at last, mechanically, passing his hand over his forehead to brush away an imaginary something there.

But the girl's eager eyes were already fixed upon the opposite hills which, seemingly destitute of life, lay in strange convolutions beneath the blazing sun, their gumbo-blackened outlines softened by the shimmering distance.

ONJIJITKA'S LAMENT

"Look, Tom!" she cried, suddenly, in quick and burning excitement. "There — on the hill — no, beyond the Gap — the second rise!"

Plainly silhouetted against the blue and sunlit sky on the highest point on the other side, rode a man who had not been there a moment before and who must have just accomplished the tortuous climb to the level. In a moment, he had disappeared from view behind the rim, into the broad high plains beyond.

"He rides like Henry Hoffman," said Tom, in a dangerously calm voice. "LaDue is a slop in the saddle."

"But Henry Hoffman works for LaDue," said Rosebud.

"Yes, Henry Hoffman works for LaDue," said Tom, slowly. "We must find another boat," he added, decisively.

He glanced keenly up and down the sandy, treacherous shore. The Indian girl had no need to deprecate his slow, methodical reasoning now. When action was the paramount consideration, his the initiative, hers to follow. He explained briefly during their short and unsatisfactory search for another boat what he intended to do. He would cross the river if he had to swim it, go

THE HOMESTEADERS

to Ole Johnson's place a quarter of a mile down the river, and borrow his fast horse. He was confident that thus equipped, even with the handicap of lost time, he could overtake any horse that LaDue owned, or any horse on the range for that matter, except the one Josephine was riding.

Half-sunken in the fine, shifting, and watery sands and considerably below the usual boat landing, they came suddenly upon a clumsy skiff, an ancient derelict whose days of adequate service had long since gone by. Nevertheless, they quickly dragged it upon the shore, quickly turned it upon its side and emptied it of its contents, Rosebud obeying the man's behests with an unquestioning faith and comprehension that boded well for Josephine's rescue.

"It leaks like the devil," said Tom, "but when it is full I'll abandon it."

He kicked off his shoes as he spoke, in anticipation of the contemplated emergency. Fortunately a pair of oars thrown up on the bank and forgotten these many moons were found to be reasonably sound and Tom determined to trust himself and his mission without further delay to this precarious means of transportation.

ONJIJITKA'S LAMENT

"I will go with you to bail for you," proffered Rosebud, bravely.

"No, Rosebud," said Tom, firmly. "You are needed here. Have you thought of the possibility of—some one's returning and attempting to burn the house in order to hide all evidence of the crime? You know what to do if any one comes. Good-bye, girl."

Rosebud did not linger to see how he fared. The man out there in the condemned boat had little need of the girl's emotional attendance upon this play of his, either for moral support or to feed his enthusiasm. This was not a spectacular play to be acted before the grandstand or a coterie of ardent admirers whose champion he was. It was the play of life and death. He had need of nothing in this world but his own indomitable spirit, his steady nerve, his incomparable strength and—the thought of Josephine. In the world beyond, perhaps, he had need of much, but that did not bother Tom, because if he had stopped to think about how great was his need of a power far superior to his own, his opportunity would have been lost. So he concentrated all his faculties upon his own capabilities, and the Indian girl knew that he would do well. But there

THE HOMESTEADERS

was one who needed her. She glanced once at the man making his slow, wearisome way across the river, her eagerness and animation gradually giving place to a strange immobility of expression, then turned, and, abandoning the heavy sand of the wagon road for the greater solitude and aloofness of an untried way through the timber, silently and swiftly made her way back to the Broken Key.

The terrible push of the current gave Tom little time to bail the rapidly filling boat. The water did not seep its way through infinitesimal crevices but literally poured in through the gaping cracks of the water-soaked and water-warped flat bottom, with a gurgle and a chuckle that seemed to gloat, tantalizingly, in anticipation of the inevitable result of this hard-fought struggle for supremacy. When he desisted for a moment in his effort to cut the channel as nearly as possible at right angles, he was carried swiftly down the river so that he lost any advantage that accrued temporarily from the lightened boat, as it soon filled again, and the little headway he had gained was more than balanced by the loss of his ability now to make an advantageous landing at the Gap. Meanwhile, up there beyond those

ONJIJITKA'S LAMENT

frowning and precipitous cliffs, an unprotected girl was riding furiously for her life, maybe, while a fiend rode in relentless pursuit. The water played treacherously around his bare feet, splashing back and forth with a gathering momentum, swayed by the impetus of the powerful and determined strokes of the oars wielded undauntedly against heavy odds. Now the water covered his ankles. His exertion was gigantic. He had no more strength in reserve. He was using it all—to the very dregs. Perspiration came out in big beads on his forehead and trickled down his set face. The handkerchief around his throat became damp and steamy and choking, but he could not spare a hand to remove it. Sunlight scintillated on the dancing ripples and his eyes ached with the glare of it until the green of the receding shore was lost to him in a blur of shimmering white.

He was half way across when the hungry, ingulfing waters flowed over the sides of the boat and met, with the exultant kiss of the conquering, the inner waters which, like some warriors of Greece æons ago, who, having gained a surreptitious entrance into the city of their wrath, treacherously it may be, but with the fortunes of

THE HOMESTEADERS

war, opened its gates to the conquering horde, had made this victorious meeting possible. Tom was prepared for the triumphant embrace. He rolled easily into the water, away from the suction of the sinking boat, and rested for the fraction of a minute upon his back before striking out for the still distant shore.

The odds were tremendous but he overcame them all, and accomplished his stint to the quieter waters that crowded against the steep, slaty cliffs, and breathed freely once more. Here a new difficulty presented itself and one that threatened grave results. The annual June rise had begun and the river was rolling high between its banks, so that only where the deeper ravines drew to the river was a landing practicable or even possible. He had drifted so far with the current that he had long ago passed the deep gap in the hills that gave access for crossing to the island and to the Broken Key ranch, and now a perpendicular wall of solid chalk rock reared itself upward, appalling in its significance. The wash of other rises had worn the rock almost to the smoothness of glass, so that there was nothing a man might grasp to stay his deadly progress down the river. Had he passed Ole Johnson's

ONJIJITKA'S LAMENT

cattle trail to the water course? If he had, poor Josephine! He was very strong to endure. He might manage to keep the greedy water out of his lungs by kindly luck and by just drifting until this hideous nightmare of an unbroken cliff gave way to the open country, but it would be too late for Josephine, far too late, poor Josephine! The thought made him frantic for the moment. He tore at the unresponsive surface with impotent hands and a maddened brain until many spots were stained with the blood of his cruel efforts. The uselessness of it all, however, soon calmed his desperation and, well nigh exhausted, he allowed himself to drift idly along, keeping himself afloat with one hand while the other he dragged slowly along the menacing wall, ready to clutch at the first knob or embrasure that offered a hold to his tingling fingers. Though how to scale the cliff, granted a foothold gained, was a problem of which he would not let himself think until the time came to grapple with it, hand to hand. There would be time enough then to find a way or — not to find a way.

Thank God, he had not drifted beyond Ole Johnson's gulch after all. A warmth came back to his heart, the old fire leaped into the gray eyes

THE HOMESTEADERS

that had looked so closely upon death, and so gallantly. Once more it was his to shape his course and pursue it. Ah, but the feel of it was good!

He bounded upon the shore, ran swiftly along the jagged way unmindful of his unshod feet, until he came to the longed-for gap in the hills. In the shortest time possible for the accomplishment thereof, he had made known his wants to Ole Johnson, a bachelor Scandinavian, a recluse by habit, but a humanitarian by instinct, else he never had given over his loved thoroughbred to such a dare-devil rider on such a dare-devil errand, and was in the saddle, rebelted with Ole's own cartridge belt and armed with his pistols, and was cutting across the sun-seared plain on the trail of the man with the baby blue eyes who had told him once that "He must be a-movin' on."

CHAPTER XVII

BURRINGTON JOINS THE CHASE

WHEN he came out upon the main road, he noted with a feeling of intense relief that the tracks of pursuer and pursued were plainly stamped thereon. The rain had wrought well for his peace of mind, for as yet there were no signs of Josephine's having been overtaken. The regularity of the hoof-prints remained unbroken for many a mile with no faltering of the one, as if the hand that guided had been suddenly struck down, and with no perceptible quickening of the other as if in a sudden burst of triumphant recognition of a weakening on the part of her who rode ahead. A hope, faintly illusive in the beginning but gradually growing stronger and more abiding, took possession of him — a hope that Josephine had not been taken unawares, that she had been on her guard from the first and had been miles in the lead before ever this chopper of wood had crossed the river. As for the horse she rode, there was no danger but that he would become infused with the spirit of

THE HOMESTEADERS

the chase at the first hint of an unfriendly presence in his rear. He had good blood in him and had fleetness of foot and an unusual strength of endurance without the vicious unreliability of the average mongrel range-bred bronco. He had also been broken and trained by a proud master. He now stood as an accurate exponent of the pride of man combined with the pride of beast. Tom could not know what manner of horse-flesh Henry Hoffman was astride, but he knew that this quondam cowboy had ridden away from the Seven-up on that never-to-be-forgotten morning when the ice went out, upon a rough-coated, tangle-tailed, calico pony with an antagonistic gleam in his eyes and an innate aversion to undue haste. These same characteristics had won for him, during his brief sojourn, immunity from active service, because there was no time to waste at the Seven-up; and so the pony had been allowed to wander and feast undisturbed upon the good grass lands, while the man whom he had grudgingly carried to this undreamed-of horse heaven, snubbed other mistaken beasts and rode them to cattle. Frank LaDue owned no thoroughbreds; hence the man had gained little, even granting that he had discarded the calico

JOINING THE CHASE

pony for an uncertain mount borrowed from the indifferent horse herd of the islander. There were good grounds for the warmth of faith that Tom hugged to himself as Ole Johnson's horse ate up the distance in voracious mouthfuls. Little need was there of boot or spur. The tap of Tom's bare heel was incentive enough and to spare for the best efforts of an animal already on its mettle.

By far the greater portion of the distance was well behind him and the breath of an involuntary prayer of thanksgiving had but just escaped his undemonstrative lips when two riders appeared before his strained gaze—perhaps a mile ahead of him—perhaps more. They were much too far removed for him to see the muscular play of the cruel struggle for more speed when their speed was already so great they seemed to be skimming over the way like birds. After his set-back in crossing the river, he had not dared to believe that he might overtake them. Surely Josephine had loitered on the way, and as surely for some purpose that he could not fathom, Henry had lingered, too. Why? He did not wait for an answer to the half-formed question in his mind, but, digging his heels once more in the animal's sides, he bent his

THE HOMESTEADERS

head, and the horse that had seemingly been already doing its best—sprang forward with a new impetus, so that the light breeze which had come out of the north after the storm pressed like a strong wind and finally lifted his heavy hat from his head and deposited it upon the road far behind. He let it lie where it fell. One of those figures ahead had much advantage in the lead. It was Josephine, of course; but could she maintain it? At any moment might not the man cut short this ghastly play by means of a bullet? He tingled with the dread of the sound of a shot, and then caught his breath sharply with the fear that he might not hear it should it occur, but the wind was with him and Josephine still rode unhampered and with a fine grip of herself.

My God! Had it come? The report of a rifle came floating back upon the wind. Josephine still kept her seat, but all at once she seemed to be losing ground. Had she or the horse been hit, or had he overestimated the horse's endurance? Just two short miles beyond the grove of trees lay the town on the bluff side, and behind—less than a mile now—so close that if he only had his rifle its carrying power might even now put a sudden end to this terrible strain—so close

JOINING THE CHASE

that if he failed in his mission he should simply turn stern, accusing eyes to the distant sky, curse the grinning fates that tantalized, and die — rode the man who loved her with his whole strong heart. But what could his strength avail her now? The man would certainly shoot her before he could get close enough to stop him. He noticed that she again seemed to be gaining. “Oh, Josephine! Josephine!” he breathed, not realizing that he spoke aloud, so great was the stress of his effort and the fear of what might at any moment now stay her in her gallant race for life. “If you can only keep up a little longer I may be able to help you.”

He heard another shot and saw Josephine disappear around the grove. As Henry neared the turning point, Tom, with the forlorn hope that the staring distance would carry the sound of it to the ears of the man who was about to follow into the blankness beyond the trees and warn him that he was not alone with his fell design, seized his pistol, so ineffectual at that distance, and shot rapidly many times into the face of the wind, nor did he desist until Henry, too, had disappeared from sight. For the first time since the precipitous wall, whose foundation had been bathed

THE HOMESTEADERS

in the turbulent waters of the June rise, had presented itself immutably to his impotent hands, utter hopelessness laid hold of him coldly.

He drew in his horse somewhat when he came to the turn, for it seemed to him that he could not bear to see what he dreaded had come to pass. But the way opened before him, straight, sunny, deserted, save for a runty calico pony that grazed by the wayside. How many, many times in the years gone by had it stretched before him thus and yet — In the momentary bewilderment that preceded comprehension, a rifle shot rang out sharply in the waiting silence. He heard the bullet whistle purringly past him, felt against his bronzed cheek the slight, cool breath of the displaced air, and with the quick conclusion that Henry Hoffman lay in ambush for him, he jerked his horse back upon its haunches simultaneously with the act of again seizing the pistol that had been returned to its holster; but at that moment a slim, girlish, blue-clad figure with dishevelled yellow hair, a white face, and wide, appealing eyes ran out from somewhere among the trees and stood panting before him.

“Did I kill you?” There was a sharp agony in her voice.

JOINING THE CHASE

“Don’t I look very much alive?” asked Tom, with a little unsteady laugh of relief as he threw himself from his horse. “I feel alive, I assure you, very much so in fact. Oh, yes, my hat! No wonder you were alarmed. I must look sort of savage and no mistake. Why, I left that back a ways. I had n’t any real use for it, you know. You will perceive that I have dispensed with all superfluities of dress,” he continued, glancing deprecatingly at his bare feet and talking just to try to talk away the woe in her eyes. He was breathing heavily from his late exertions. “And so it was you, little woman, and not Henry, after all, who had it in for me. Who ever would have thought that you desired my blood?” he rallied her, softly.

“Don’t!” she besought, so sorrowfully that he desisted and was silent. “Why have you left Jack?” she accused, suddenly, calling him to account unshrinkingly because of a revival of that old suspicion that there had been something he ought to have told them. She took firm hold of her self-control so that she should betray no sign of weakness before this man who might, if he would, have prevented Jack’s murder. “You have broken your promise. I did wrong to trust

THE HOMESTEADERS

you. Your leaving him is in keeping with—other things that you have done. Why are you here? Why do you not go on your way? We do not need you—Jack and I.”

“I left Rosebud in charge at the Broken Key,” said Tom, steadily, though he bowed his head to conceal the pain that gripped him at this second manifestation of aversion and suspicion. “We thought that you were in great danger because we saw Henry Hoffman taking your trail. So I came and she stayed. What has become of Henry?” he asked, dully, his eyes straying for a moment to the calico pony feeding by the roadside, flecks of foam still lurking about his neck and flanks.

“I killed him,” said Josephine, in a sort of calm despair. “I slipped into the woods there and hid and waited and when he came around the corner, I shot him. He is dead. I dragged him in there out of sight—he was very heavy and he killed Jack, but I had to do it, did n’t I? There was no other way. So I carried him there—but oh, I did hate him so and when I had to put my arms around him, I shut my eyes tight to keep from shooting him again. He is in there now. He is so helpless. I shot him, you know. He is lying

JOINING THE CHASE

down on the wet grass and his blue eyes are closed—they were just like a baby's, weren't they?" she questioned irrationally.

Tom could not speak, but he took the cold hands in a strong, warm clasp and held them thus.

"And then I heard some one else coming. I thought at first it was a dream," she continued, "it sounded just as things sound in a dream. But after a while, I knew that it was not a dream and it came to me all of a sudden that it must be Frank LaDue. I do not know why it was not Frank LaDue, do you? He hated Jack so. It must have been LaDue—but it was not—it was you—and so I shot at you."

"But you did not hit me at all, Josephine," said Tom, quietly. "Your bullet lies out there on the prairie somewhere. It is a lucky thing for me, I am thinking, that Louis has his limitations as instructor in the canny art of firearms. Come, show me where you laid him."

She withdrew her hands quickly from his grasp and led the way to the place where the blue-eyed boy lay. Upon reaching the spot, she turned away in a strong revulsion of feeling, for the man had struggled to a partial sitting posture and

THE HOMESTEADERS

was leaning against the same cottonwood tree that had sheltered Josephine while she waited for those other footsteps to come nearer. He was pale from loss of blood but composed and almost apologetic in his attitude of feeble reproach.

"Gee! But you can shoot, girl," he said, glancing dubiously at Burrington, as they approached. "Or were you aimin' at me?" he questioned, jocularly. "I've known women folks before that could hit almost anything they were n't aimin' at. What made you do it, girl? What have I ever done to you? Ain't you Jack Carroll's sister? Why, we're neighbors, did n't you know that? Considerin' that fact, it was n't just white for you to treat me like this — now, was it?"

"Shut up, Henry, will you?" interrupted Tom, sternly. "We do not want any of that nonsense. It won't do you any good and you are only wasting breath. We know all about everything. Just keep still, will you?"

He knelt as he spoke to ascertain the amount of injury the man had sustained.

"Sure thing, Tom, if you say the word. But I certainly would like to know why the girl's got it in for me."

JOINING THE CHASE

"You—you—were following me," accused Josephine, chokingly, "and you shot at me."

"Don't you ever believe it," protested the man, earnestly. "I was just ridin' to town to see Boss Frank. I was ridin' like the devil, I admit that, but that's just my way. I was raised a cowboy, you know. I just shot to attract your attention, so you would stop and wait for me. I never dreamed I was scarin' you. Why," he continued, turning to Tom, "many a time I've seen her about the island or crossin' that big gulch on their place, drivin' the cows home, singin' purty-like to herself, with the sunset on that yeller hair." His cheeks flushed and he brushed his arm before his eyes. "Frank always said it was n't a woman's work," he concluded abruptly.

"Why did you kill Jack?" demanded Josephine, suddenly.

"Is that boy dead?" he asked with intense agitation.

"You ought to know. You killed him," said Josephine, steadily.

"I do not know what you have against me," said Henry, slowly. "I never chased you and I never killed your brother. I was coming to town to see Frank about haulin' some wood over

THE HOMESTEADERS

to the Agency. I never killed nobody in my life — never killed nothin' but just coyotes and the likes of them."

"It will be better not to say anything more now, Miss Carroll," advised Burrington, formally, as he arose to his feet. "Leave him to me. I will take care of him. It will be better for the sheriff to come here for him. He is in pretty bad shape. You will have to go on alone after all; but nothing can hurt you now. See Sheriff Dennison the very first thing. Tell him to bring three or four men with him. You must remain in Velpen. Go directly to the hotel when you have seen the sheriff and I will send my mother in to you as soon as I get back. I will go with the officers to the Broken Key and come back with Jack. It will be far better so. You will mind me, won't you?" he asked, with something of appeal struggling through the business-like formality of his directions.

She shook her head, springing into the saddle seemingly without seeing his out-stretched hand.

"I tell you that you must," he said authoritatively. "It will be far better so. Your long ride would count for nothing, as we are coming directly back. You are worn out and — you will

JOINING THE CHASE

need all of your strength. If—you do not trust me, I will let the men go to the Broken Key alone. You will stay?"

She looked at him for a moment, silently, then turned and slipped out into the road and he knew, with an irritating sense of his utter powerlessness to control her, that she would return with the men who were to come to bear John Calhoun Carroll within the sheltering arms of the law, which had struck, for him, too late.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BROKEN KEY DESERTED

ALL that was mortal of the young Southerner was to be taken back to the old home and laid to rest in the ancient burial ground where so many generations of his people were sleeping. Geoffrey Goodman, the last of kin on the mother's side, was to meet the sad little procession at Sioux City. So Josephine had arranged and so her plans were carried out.

When the spring wagon that was to carry Josephine and the Burringtons to Velpen was driven down through the Gap on the opposite shore and a vibrant hail had sounded to the waiting ones in the claim shanty of the Broken Key, Rosebud arose from her posture of silent, gloomy dejection by the table, which was still strewn with the papers and magazines that were never to be read, and glided wordlessly toward the open door. In her movements, there was a haunting, new hint of the gait of the women of the Dakotahs, the burden bearers of their race. Hitherto, her step had always been unusually elastic and untrammelled. Josephine followed her.

THE BROKEN KEY

"I wish you were going with us, Rosebud," she said, resting her right arm around the Indian girl's shoulders. "Won't you change your mind and go?"

Rosebud shook her head. Her dark hair was braided, an unusual mode for it of late, and fell below her waist in two long plaits.

"The mother of the Seven-up goes with you. There is no need of Onjijitka, the Indian girl."

"I do need you, Rosebud," said Josephine, soberly. "Do you forget how few my friends in Dakota are? I shall miss you when I get on the train. I shall look for you and you will not be there. It will be very lonely for me, Rosebud."

The girl hesitated. There were just the three present. Tom had gone down to the landing to get the boat in readiness. It was hard for her to speak her thoughts to Josephine alone—impossible in the presence of the stately mother of Tom, however kindly the elder woman's attitude toward her had always been. Her habit of repression, inherited from many generations, prevented any manifestation of feeling and held her outwardly unresponsive to Josephine's appeal.

"Onjijitka is sorry," she said at last, slowly,

THE HOMESTEADERS

"but she cannot go. Is Josephine Carroll coming back to the plains country?"

"I do not know. I do not think so," said Josephine, with a little shudder. "You are changed, Rosebud. I cannot understand why, but somehow you seem different. Oh, I wish, I wish that you were coming South with me," she cried, suddenly, throwing her arms around Rosebud's neck and kissing her passionately. "You knew him, too! Do not forget me, Rosebud! Maybe I shall come back. Good-bye! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, Josephine," said Rosebud, but still she did not go. There was something else she must say if she could. She shifted her position uneasily. Mrs. Burrington was watching her curiously. She tried to appear stolidly indifferent to the parting because of this frank inspection and she tried to make herself go and leave unsaid that which something was forcing her to say.

"We must go, Josephine, dear child," said Mrs. Burrington, at last. "Tom is waiting."

"You are right," replied Josephine, strangely loath to go and leave Rosebud standing there alone, although she could not have explained

THE BROKEN KEY

any reason for the feeling of reluctance. "We must go. Good-bye, Rosebud."

"Good-bye, Josephine," said Rosebud, and then it came, slowly and with difficulty, what she had so long wanted to say. "If you will come back to the Broken Key, I will leave Two Hawks and come and live with you. I will do the man's work — the ploughing, the planting, and the harvesting, the milking and the riding to cattle. You, Josephine, you can keep the house — pretty. I—I—cannot bear to think that cobwebs will grow over the door of the Broken Key."

She did not wait for an answer but slipped away and soon disappeared into the timber, her moccasined feet gliding forward, catlike, as she pursued her way—not in the direction of the outlying hut of Two Hawks, who had established himself practically on the very borders of the Reservation and who, under the constant and untiring promptings of his educated step-daughter, was attempting to farm in an easy, shiftless fashion,— but right out into the heart of the illimitable and shimmering prairie, where the spirits of the ancient Sioux still lurked in the rustling grasses, and the sighing winds, and the white clouds that drifted sometimes caress-

THE HOMESTEADERS

ingly over the sunny plains where they used to dwell.

"What a strange girl Rosebud is," said Mrs. Burrington. She closed the little square window carefully and drew the blinds close. "Why do you suppose she refused to go to Velpen with us?"

"I do not know," said Josephine, dreamily. "I am grateful to her for her offer. It would be a great sacrifice on her part. The sisters at Notre Dame have written to her to come back there and help teach the young children. She had almost decided to do so. I do not know what she will do now. She is different, don't you think so, too? I wish that I had asked her to come sometimes and—sweep down the cobwebs from the door. I think she would have done it for me. Come, let us go, Mrs. Burrington," she continued, restlessly. "It is so sombre in here with the blinds drawn. Oh, please, throw away those flowers first—they would be so dead if I should ever come back. We are ready now, are we not?"

They closed the door behind them and locked it.

"Jack never locked it — poor Jack," whispered

THE BROKEN KEY

Josephine, blindly. "Good-bye, Broken Key. You will never be the same any more." Then she turned and walked resolutely away down the narrow trail to the wagon road.

Tom accompanied her to Sioux City. He did not ask her permission. He went, despite the keenness with which he felt her late and wholly unexpected attitude of suspicion toward him, simply because it seemed as if he were the only one to go. The Broken Key was an isolated claim. The Carrolls had formed few intimate friendships; but it was generally understood that a close bond of mutual liking existed between the household of the wealthy Seven-up and the aristocratic young Southerners. People took it for granted, therefore, that Tom Burrington would do all there was to do. He had no choice but to bury his pain and his pride for the time being and to assume, as unobtrusively as might be, the responsibilities of the sad journey. And Josephine? If he went against her will she gave no sign. She was alone. This man had professed to be Jack's friend. Jack had trusted him — stay — had Jack trusted him altogether — without reservation and without question? From her heart she believed so and yet — Jack had said,

THE HOMESTEADERS

"I am afraid, Josephine, that Tom knows." Thinking thus, she cried her old cry, "If he knew, why did he not tell us?" and it was an exceedingly bitter cry now. But she could not forbid his attendance upon the body of his friend just because, without real foundation even, she had begun to mistrust the motives that had actuated him in his constant friendliness toward both her and Jack. Would she have forbidden it if she could? Because of the relief that she experienced on account of the grave, helpful way in which he went about the performance of his self-imposed duties, and with a fine perception held himself personally aloof from her companionship, she wished, from the bottom of her heart, that she might banish once and for all that disquieting, constantly recurring suspicion, fight it as she would, that Tom knew something that might have saved Jack's life had he told it in time. She was grateful for the comfort his masterful presence gave her, and she tried hard not to ask herself that bitter question — but she could not altogether forget.

Mrs. Burrington had been compelled to let the train slip over the rails eastward bound leaving her standing upon the platform alone. There

THE BROKEN KEY

was Louis and there were manifold duties besides which claimed her divided but scrupulously honest attentions. When she climbed into the wagon for her return journey to the Seven-up, she felt very lonely and like an old woman, and longed unaccountably for companionship; even the companionship of the Indian girl, upon whom she had looked with such curious aloofness but yesterday, would have been thrice welcome to-day.

"Drive home quickly, Charlie," she ordered, "but do let us go by way of White River."

"Why, White River 's on a gallopin' rampage, ma'am," said the cowboy, emphatically. "There won't be any crossin' there for two weeks, anyway. There ain't no other way but just to go by Frank LaDue's and cross at the ferry."

"If we must, we must," said Mrs. Burrington, resignedly. "I had hoped not to pass anywhere near there—not to-day. The look in that girl's eyes will haunt me as long as I live. But there, hurry along. What has to be, has to be, and Louis is crying his heart out this minute for that boy who is gone. Hurry along, do, please, Charlie."

At Sioux City, the little party was met by

THE HOMESTEADERS

Geoffrey Goodman, who immediately assumed charge of all the arrangements and Tom Burrington's further services were not required. He watched the train glide away from the station of the "jumping-off-place," as Jack had dubbed it once in happy raillery, his lively fancy so naming it because here was reached the limit of through train service, and more especially because here came all who would take the trail for the northwest country, and then he turned away with a heavy heart.

Josephine's plans reached their culmination when a gray-haired man and a lonely girl, accompanied only by a handful of gentlefolks, representatives of other old and failing families, and a scattering of white-headed colored people, former retainers who had spent their youth in the service of the grandfather of this generation, and perhaps by the brooding spirits of the dead, stood within a green-walled enclosure where ivy and Virginia creeper ran riot, where the crepe myrtle with its luxuriance of pink blossoms made spots of pretty color in restful contrast to the varying shades of rank green, where there was no jarring insistence of the ostentatious new to caricature the solemn slumber of centuries, and watched the

THE BROKEN KEY

laying away of the last male Carroll. He had hearkened to the lure of the great West that was opening to the steady progression of the American people and had fallen by the way, an uncanonized martyr to civilization, the costliest thing on earth, next to the sin of the world.

CHAPTER XIX

HENRY CONFESSES

WHEN Burrington returned to Velpen, the cowboy Mason, with a led horse, was waiting for him.

"Put the beast in the stable, Charlie, will you, and then ride on out home. Tell mother that I shall not be there for two or three days. I have business that will keep me in town for at least that length of time. Keep things going, boy. So long."

He turned and walked up the inclined street with long, rapid strides. It seemed strangely desolate, uncommonly crude, despite the glory of the late sunlight that shone slantingly, warmly, and cheerfully, upon the side to the east and filtered through the crevices between the western line of wooden buildings; despite the unusual number of saddled bronchos standing patiently in front of saloon and hotel, and the service-scarred buckboards wedged in alongside. The news of the tragedy had gone forth to the surrounding country where the farmer and the homesteader held sway and had re-crossed the river and pene-

HENRY CONFESSES

trated into the very heart of the range country, as well, so that the little border cow town was crowded with the curious, the interested, the knowing, the inquiring, the condemnatory, the neutral, and the quietly elated; for there were those who resented heartily the west-of-the-river encroachments of the homesteader. These were all met together to try the culprit, to judge him, to hang him or to imprison him for life, or mayhap to release him; and during the procedure of the mock trial, whiskey flowed profusely and cigarettes were rolled and consumed, seemingly in the twinkling of an eye. But the unusual air of excitement rampant in the street, and the unaccustomed noisy hilarity that issued from certain popular places of resort and which was engendered by the sociability which in turn traces its source to much strong whiskey, affected the young ranchman depressingly, and in his heart was a poignant yearning for the girl whose absence made the coming evening and all that it shadowed drearily sad, unspeakably lonely.

He had not gone far when he met Dennison, the sheriff.

"How is your prisoner?" he asked him, abruptly.

THE HOMESTEADERS

"Pretty well, considerin'."

"He will recover?"

"Sure thing. A little flesh wound is all that ails him. He's the halest and heartiest deader ever I saw, damme. And the girl thought she had done for him. If that ain't sure a good one!"

"Has he said anything?"

"You mean about things—in general?" asked the sheriff, with provoking elaboration.

"I mean about the shooting," said Tom, curtly.

"Not a word. He's glum as a buckin' broncho whenever the subject's broached and as uncommunicative as a mischief-hatchin' Injun."

"May I see him to-night, Dennison?"

"Should n't wonder. Don't believe he's hankerin' to see you, though, Tom. I don't, for a fact."

"Has he expressed himself to that effect?"

"Well, no, I can't say that he has, exactly. He used to outride for you, did n't he, before he went to choppin' wood?"

"He was in my employ for almost a year. He was a good hand at cattle. Shall we go to the jail now?"

"Ain't you goin' to get no supper first?"

HENRY CONFESSES

asked the leathery-skinned Sheriff Dennison, in surprise.

"I am not hungry and it is getting late. It may be that a conversation with Henry will whet my appetite. Come, shall we go there at once?"

A few minutes later Dennison closed the ponderous door of the jail upon Burrington with the good-natured remark, "Time unlimited," and sauntered leisurely away. The failing light that made its way through the barred window fell dimly upon the room and its occupant. The prisoner was lying flat upon his comfortless couch and he did not look up at the sound of the closing door nor the sheriff's parting words of gratuitous permission for an indefinite stay. Tom approached the prostrate figure.

"Hello, Henry," he said, in a friendly greeting.

He had determined, for the best interests of the cause upon which he was henceforth bent, to suppress in himself all weakening and dangerous dwelling upon thoughts of "the long chase" during the present conversation, and had fortified himself well for the coming combat of his wit against the other's taciturnity and of reason

THE HOMESTEADERS

against his own personal inclination, which was up in arms to do physical violence to this mockery of a man who lay there before him so sullenly.

"Hello," vouchsafed the prisoner, laconically.

"How is the gun-shot?" asked Tom, drawing the only chair in the room to the bedside and seating himself. "It is healing nicely, Dennison tells me. Do you suffer much, Henry?"

"Enough," was the ungracious response.

"Tell me all about it, won't you, Henry?" asked Tom, coming to the point with the intuitive perception that something lay heavy on the young fellow's mind. There was a hunted look in his eyes and he fingered the coverlet restlessly.

"Why should I? You ain't no friend o' mine," said Henry, bluntly.

"Do not be too sure of that," said Tom, slowly. "Maybe I don't exactly love you. I do not think you really expect that, after all that has happened. But you know me pretty well, do you not? I am capable of befriending a man without loving him. You are pressingly in need of a friend, my boy, don't you realize that? Did I ever play you dirt while you were at the Seven-up?"

"You sure never did," protested the prisoner,

HENRY CONFESSES

earnestly. He propped himself up on his pillow after giving his supposedly unwelcome visitor this assurance and turned haggard eyes upon him for the first time. "You were always square with us boys," he added, gratefully.

"I always meant to be and — mean to be. You are pretty young, are you not? I do not believe that you are a day over twenty-one. I cannot promise you the leniency of the court, Henry, but I think that you will do well to make confession. I think that your age and evident contrition and — willingness to do all that is in your power to help along the cause of justice, even to the giving up of yourself as an earnest of your sincerity, will be taken into consideration. I say this to you in all honesty. I am telling you nothing that I do not have faith in, myself, and my years and experience are many more than yours."

"Why are you takin' all this trouble? If you think I am guilty, why do you want an easy sentence for me?" asked Henry, unexpectedly.

"Because I believe that there is one more to blame than you are."

"What if I tell you that I did n't do it — and I did n't —" said Henry, feverishly. "You

THE HOMESTEADERS

'could n't do nothin' to me then. How could you prove that I done anything that I never done, I'd like to know? You 're just workin' me to give myself up. It shows how plumb weak you are on evidence against me."

"Do you want me to tell you what I shall do?" asked Tom, rising. "Well, I will tell you, since you ask me. I am a pretty good witness against you, Henry, myself. I shall begin by telling the court and the jury about that little affair in the gulch, you know."

He paused to note the effect of his unexpected onslaught. The prisoner sat straight up and in his answer was a quick and burning excitement.

"My God, Tom! That was a gray wolf you shot at!"

"How do you know?" asked Tom, coolly, well pleased at this unmistakable corroboration of his suspicion as to the identity of the man in the gulch.

"Why, I met the wench in the woods the next day and she told me," he lied, unconvincingly.

"And what ails your wrist that you keep it bound up so carefully?" pursued Tom, relentlessly. He did not fail to note the glance of startled rage which Henry bestowed first upon

HENRY CONFESSES

the challenged wrist and then upon his questioner. "You evidently have some foundation for that seemingly random shot about the gray wolf," continued Tom, thoughtfully. "I did n't see you that morning down at the woodpile when I explained the subterfuge to—Mr. Carroll." He could not bring himself to speak the old, familiar monosyllabic name "Jack" in this presence. "But doubtless you were there somewhere in hiding. Well, I shall embellish that tale some, Henry. I shall tell how I saw Josephine Carroll go down into the valley —"

"Don't, Mr. Burrington," interrupted Henry, huskily. "I can't stand it. I'll see the sun on that girl's shinin' hair just before she went down into the valley to my dyin' day. She was singin' along soft-like to herself — I could hear her just as plain — the evenin' was so still. When I heard the first sound of rollin' dirt that the leader of the herd had dislodged when he started down the path, I knew the time had come and I crouched down in a little side washout and waited. The first heifer was well-nigh up t'other bank before she came to the edge of the gulch. Oh, Lord! She was purty! Her yellor hair was so bright and her hat was off and she was singin'

THE HOMESTEADERS

so soft and sweet. I never wanted to kill a woman, nohow." His voice trailed off into mournful bitterness. "I don't know why in hell I ever said I would. I must have been crazy. Anyway, I just could n't do it when the time come. Why, I ain't a plumb brute, Mr. Burrington. I— just could n't kill that purty girl ridin' down that steep bank so unconscious-like and singin' so soft. She was n't lookin' for foul play. Why should she have been? She had never done any harm to anybody. Not a mite in all the world — and I just could n't do it. I tried—I tried hard—I was afraid not to. I tried three or four times. I pointed my rifle at her true all those times, but I could n't pull the trigger. If she'd glanced my way—or stopped her singin'—or showed any scare—I might have done it, but she did n't do any of those things. She just kept on her way so purty and unsuspectin' and I could n't do it. I'd lower every time. But I had to do it, so I tried again and—this time I pulled." In the deep dusk, Tom clenched his hands while perspiration started from his body till he prickled with the damp heat of it. "But—someway—I don't know how it happened—I done it so quick—I slipped a finger in between, and the

HENRY CONFESSES

hammer could n't reach the cap of the cartridge through my finger, so there was n't any concussion after all. Then you came, and I slipped away and crossed the rock reef back to the island."

He seemed exhausted by his impulsive recital and lay back on his pillow, breathing heavily. Tom was silent a moment, waiting for him to recover; then he asked, gravely:

"Why did you shoot Mr. Carroll, Henry?"

"I had to," said the young fellow, "there was no other way out of the mix-up."

"Why did Frank LaDue want him out of the way?" asked Tom, searchingly.

"Ask him," said Henry, with a prompt return to his former attitude of dogged reserve.

Tom changed his tactics immediately. He had already discovered that the most satisfactory results from this interview were to be derived from keeping in close touch with the subject of Josephine.

"I cannot understand, Henry," he began, meditatively, "why, if, as you say, you had thoroughly made up your mind that you could not, under any circumstances, make away with the life of a woman, you yet gave such monstrous,

THE HOMESTEADERS

inhuman chase to Josephine Carroll so soon afterward. It strikes me as rather an anomalous proceeding in view of your recent and reiterated declaration."

The man hesitated for a moment; then he put this question to his interlocutor, suddenly, unexpectedly:

"Will you give me your word of honor that you won't give him away—if I tell you all about it?"

"Won't you tell me—without the promise?"

"Not one word," returned Henry, sullenly.

"Then I promise—until you yourself release me from the pledge."

The simple promise needed no bolstering of words. Henry asked for none, but proceeded at once:

"I don't care for myself—you're dead on to me; besides, I can't get that yeller-haired girl out of my mind. But he—Frank—why, he'd kill me if he knew I'd told on him. I don't know how he came to get such a hold on me. I met him for the first time soon after I went to the Broken Key to help out while he—Carroll, you know—was laid up with a broken leg. I wish to the Lord I'd never set eyes on him! I wish

HENRY CONFESSES

to the Lord I'd never a-left the old Seven-up. The Carrolls' cows took to strayin' over to the island and I run across him one day when I was over there lookin' for a runaway heifer. He asked me where I was from and seemed nice and friendly. When I told him I was a sort o' rollin' stone and had been in lots o' places since I was knee-high-to-a-grasshopper, he said if I ever got tired o' my job at the Seven-up, why, he had a good place for a likely feller like me that would pay more than herdin' cattle. We talked considerable. I remember his goin' on a good deal about settlers comin' in and spoilin' the ranges for the cattlemen. That sounded all right to me, for they were makin' the same sort o' kick down in Texas, where I started from, and they were talkin' the same sort o' stuff all along the line. I've even heard you sort o' cuss the luck yourself, Tom, though you always 'lowed it had to come. And then he began on Miss Carroll. He asked me what I thought o' her, and asked me was n't she a bold jade, though? I thought he was just foolin', but it seemed as if he'd begun to hate the girl even then. He sure hated her a plenty."

"Why, Henry?"

THE HOMESTEADERS

"You 'll have to ask him, Tom," said Henry, evasively. "I never understood exactly. He was always talkin' about spoilin' the ranges. That was all bluff, though. He did n't give a tinker's damn whether the ranges was spoiled or not, or how many homesteaders crossed the river, providin' they did n't get too neighborly and settle down so close to him as to interfere with his plans. That range howl was pure bluff. I did n't even know he had any cattle at first. I think he was mad, too, because them Carrolls were gettin' all that nice bottom land. He seemed possessed to keep people off 'n it. I reckon he thought he 'd get it sometime himself by some hook or crook. He was always callin' the girl names because she was tryin' to do a man's work. And then when she 'd got the evidence agin him about rustlin' that there milch cow, I thought the man 'd lose his mind he was that mad. And then he began on me. Frank's a bad man, Tom. He's a devil. I wish I 'd never gone to work for him. He never let up on me. I'm a foolish sort o' feller, and I always want to do what anybody asks me to; it always seems as if that's what I want to do, too, what they want me to do, specially while I'm talkin'

HENRY CONFESSES

to 'em. I don't seem to know how to get around it."

There was a knock at the door.

"Come!" said Tom, impatiently.

The door was opened slightly and the jailer's head was thrust into the room.

"Hey, Tom! The old man's back and wants to know if you're goin' to talk there all night? Ain't you most through?"

"Tell Dennison that we are almost through and that he need not worry," said Tom, briefly.

"You ain't afraid?" asked the man facetiously.

"No," said Tom, more curtly than before.

"Shall I bring a light?"

"No."

The door banged shut.

"He said he'd give me half the island and a team and wagon beside," went on Henry, wearily, "if I'd exterm'nate the whole bunch. He said he'd go up for sure, for cattle stealing, when the court came round—the girl had the evidence—and he wanted me to put plasters over their mouths before then, so 's they could n't blab. When I asked him why he did n't do it himself, he said they'd jump on him right away, but that no one would ever think o' me. He said if they

THE HOMESTEADERS

did that, he had a stand-in with the sheriff and nothin' would happen to me. He talked that stuff, day after day, till I promised — seemed as if I 'd go plumb mad if something did n't happen to stop his everlastin' dingin'. I was to do away with the girl first — he hated her so. I was to do it at the gulch. But — I could n't. Gosh-all-hemlocks! but he was mad when he came back from Westover and found I had n't done it. So at last I promised to go to the house and shoot 'em both. He went to Velpen that night so's he could prove an alibi or something like that, and just as it was gettin' dusk I crossed over and crept up to the house and peeked in at the west window. There was the girl again with her yeller hair piled on top o' her head and she had on a big blue apron — " his voice faltered. "Seems as if I can't never get away from seein' her movin' around so sweet and lovin'-like. I could n't do it then. She sat down after a bit. Seemed as if she was goin' to read the paper. I could n't see her no more then — she was too close to the wall, I guess. The kid was settin' on the other side o' the table, and I could see him all right — and the brother — I could see him plain — he was settin' on the door step bathin' his feet —

HENRY CONFESSES

and — and — oh, it was awful.” He paused for breath. He was growing weak from the strain of his woful story.

“Tell me only the most important things to-night, Henry,” said Tom, gently. “Leave the rest for another time.”

“It seemed as if I could n’t do it,” continued Henry, deliriously. “I tried five times. One time he looked right at me, it seemed like, with his big tired eyes, brown like the girl’s. I was five feet back and in the shadow, and I know he did n’t see me, really, but I could n’t any more have pulled the hammer with those eyes lookin’ toward me than I could have shot myself right that minute. Once a screech owl startled me — I thought at first it was a spirit. The other times, I just could n’t do it. But at last I did. I shot true and straight right through the window, and he never said a word. He just fell over easy-like and lay still. I never killed nothin’ before,” he said, pitifully, “but just critters and coyotes. I ran around to the woodpile to see if I could n’t muster up nerve enough to shoot the girl through the door, but when she came — I — could n’t. I went back to the island and I guess I did n’t know just what I was doin’. I did n’t strike the

THE HOMESTEADERS

road and went plugin' along through the mud and water—there was back water from the rise—and finally I heard some shootin'. I thought I was done for, but I got into the house all right. I could still hear the shootin', and, Tom, I heard that shootin' all night long. I never went back—I stayed right there in the house, but I suppose she thought I was hangin' round, and that plucky girl just kept shootin' all night long, and it was so dark and it rained after a while, and she was all alone with just the kid. She never stopped till it got light. I got scared then to have Frank come back and find her still alive—he'd have so much rather it had been her 'stead o' him if only one was gone; so after a while I picked up my gun and started back, but then I saw you ridin' like the devil, so I knew she must have sent the kid. I went back and changed my shoes—I could n't ride in those things, and I thought maybe I'd have to bolt. When you came over to the island, I was hidin' in the timber, and when I saw Josephine ridin' off alone, I—took after her. I was afraid o' what Frank would say when he came back. I was afraid he'd kill me. But, Tom, I don't believe I'd have done it," he continued. "I don't believe I could

HENRY CONFESSES

have brought myself to have done it, after all. I was n't trying to hit her when I shot."

"I believe you, Henry," said Tom, with grave kindness. "You are worn out. I will leave you now. But I will come again in the morning. Don't you worry. I always knew, Henry, that there was some one more to blame than you. Good-night."

True to his word, he came again in the morning. He was bent upon obtaining release from his pledge of yesterday. It was a gigantic undertaking. Henry was possessed of a strange, unreasoning fear of his employer, coupled with a stubborn loyalty that held strongly to the opinion that treachery to an accessory was the meanest kind of meanness. But Tom persevered and finally, after much useless argument and persuasion, he said, very seriously, that Frank LaDue at large was a constant menace to the life and well-being of Josephine Carroll, and at the mention of her name Henry was as a child again. He gave his permission to act, readily, almost eagerly. Without this permission, Tom Burrington would have held the confidence as sacred as if sealed with the seal of the Roman Confessional. As he arose to depart, the intensity of relief de-

THE HOMESTEADERS

picted upon his face was so great that he seemed years younger and he strode to the door with much of the old spring in his step. When he reached the door, he heard his name called in a hesitating, apologetic sort of way and turned quickly, dreading a recall of the promise that insured him power to prosecute his hearty desire to put the arch-offender where he could no longer offend and where justice would be meted out to him as he had measured.

“Say, Tom,” Henry was saying, confusedly, “it ain’t as if I was gettin’ off, myself, by givin’ him away. I could n’t do that. I know I’m in for it. I ain’t tryin’ to get off by turnin’ agin him. You know that, don’t you? But I reckon the real reason for his not wantin’ any one round was because of the use he put that there island to. It will bear investigatin’, for sure. And there’s a dugout there, almost under the Carrolls’ noses, where you’ll find the rest of your horses—if you’re quick about it. You-all have been mighty slow. I should n’t wonder if that young Injun buck, Bear Heart, the one who’s after Rosebud, you know, had got ahead o’ you, after all. He’s been on the trail for some time and she’s been helpin’ him. Them Injuns ain’t

HENRY CONFESSES

got no use for Frank. You-all ain't been very smart, and that 's a fact."

Tom went directly to the State's Attorney; a complaint was filed and a warrant issued for the arrest of Frank LaDue, of LaDue Island, on the charge of murder.

CHAPTER XX

THE END OF THE LONG CHASE

THREE weeks later, toward the close of a long, warm afternoon in mid-summer, Tom Burrington was riding musingly homeward over the Seven-up trail. He had that day received a letter from Josephine Carroll in answer to a formal, business one of his own which he had written to her shortly after her departure. In it, he made brief mention of the temporary care he had assumed of the Broken Key stock and added that, subject to her approval, of course, he had so arranged it that they should graze with the Seven-up herds until such time as she should have made her plans for their ultimate disposal. He was also taking care of the White Slave, the boy whom Jack had befriended. "Do not be too hard on the boy," he wrote. "He is very young. He heard the shooting and hid in the woods all night. He was afraid to go home with the cows and afraid to go anywhere for fear of meeting some of the old gang whom he had turned against." He had pre-

THE END OF THE CHASE

sumed to act thus without her authority because she had left so hurriedly that there had been neither time nor opportunity to make definite provision for their welfare during her absence. What were her plans concerning the two claims? It would be well for her to come to some decision within a reasonable length of time or they might be jumped and her rights contested. They were considered desirable claims, and it was very probable that they would not be allowed to stand tenantless long unless she blocked any future trouble by conforming strictly to the letter of the law in regard to homesteads, the sooner, the better. As she doubtless knew, her brother had lived upon his quarter section a sufficient length of time to permit her, as sole heir, to commute and obtain a patent on his land without its in any way interfering with her own homestead rights. She could then, if she so desired, have a shanty erected and live upon her own claim. Meanwhile, he awaited her commands concerning her immediate business affairs and especially in respect of her concurrence or non-concurrence in the steps he had taken for the temporary relief of the Broken Key stock.

It had been a cold letter, perhaps, under the

THE HOMESTEADERS

circumstances, but he had so disliked to do what he had been compelled to do without her permission and under the ban of her displeasure. His pride had rebelled heartily, but he could not help himself. There was no one else to be responsible for the effects the dead boy had left, and Jack had been his friend, and — he loved her — Josephine. He loved her so much that nothing she could do or say now could dispossess that great love, though, of course, now, he could never tell her so. That time was past. The time had come when he was looking upon the canvas face to face, and she was not there. But he loved her, and because of that he had swallowed this much of his pride that he must suffer her probable misconstruction of his motives in order that when she was ready to take up again the burden of living that would be hard enough for her, poor Josephine, for a long weary while, she might find that she had not been altogether alone and that she might take up her burden without, at least, the handicap of the neglect or mismanagement of the material things of her life. After all, was she so much to blame for having thus taken her stand alone, accounting all against her because the plots formed in opposition to her and hers had been conceived in

THE END OF THE CHASE

such utter darkness and mystery, and had arrived at their infamous growth in such profound secrecy, and yet withal had so pervaded the very atmosphere she breathed and had so hemmed her about on every side that she could have no power to discriminate and say: this man is and that man is not my friend? Was she so much to blame then? In his heart he knew that an unfriendly feeling toward the Carrolls as homesteaders had rankled in the breasts of many of his fellow cattlemen. He knew that this feeling of hostility, powerful because men of power held it, was catered to and promulgated by popular favor, and that it was this that had made it next to impossible for Jack to get native help to assist him in farming his land and thereby establishing a position with which the people were so thoroughly out of sympathy; but he also knew in his heart, that, though most of the cattlemen would have been honestly relieved and more than glad had young Carroll lost heart and found it advisable to relinquish his claim and try his fortune elsewhere, and even might not have been above assisting him to this wise conclusion in divers innocent ways, there was not one among them who would have dreamed of adopting the

THE HOMESTEADERS

extreme measure for ridding the country of his presence; and that they were few who were not inexpressibly shocked and indignant at the tragic outcome of their dissatisfaction. Not at the doors of the cattlemen could the terrible tragedy be laid; but could Josephine know this? Could she be brought to believe it? "It has come to me that you knew something that you would not tell us," she had said. Was the suspicion unnatural in the light of circumstances? He had known that their coming was unwelcome to the majority of the ranchmen—but so had Jack, in the end. Could he have dreamed that Jack's life would be the price? He had known that pluck, endurance, tact, and a never flagging patience on the part of the young homesteader would finally win for him immunity and place, that no arbitrary means would be taken for his expulsion. Could he have dreamed of the miserable LaDue complication? Ah, but ought he not to have dreamed of it? Had he not heartily disliked the very thought of the man's nearness to her the first time he had ever seen Josephine? Had he ever respected LaDue or given him the credit for an atom of integrity? Thus he blamed himself harshly and he had been sore beset between his love, his wounded

THE END OF THE CHASE

pride, and his own feeling of personal blame when he had written that letter, coldly, perhaps. And she had answered thus:

MY DEAR MR. BURRINGTON:

I thank you for taking charge of the Broken Key stock and am sorry that my thoughtlessness made it necessary for you to put yourself to so much trouble on my account. Since you have been so good, however, I shall further tax your generosity by asking you to continue your supervision until I have come to some decision as to my future course. I shall try to decide soon, so that I may relieve you of what, I am afraid, must be an unpleasant task—the caring for the interests of a homesteader. Forgive me if I am harsh. Indeed, I am grateful. It is only that I cannot see the light.

You ask me if I intend to go back. I will let you know as soon as I know myself. I do not think, however, that I shall ever go back. I cannot bear to think of it—and I am afraid. My brother's murderer is still at large. The interests of the cattlemen are seemingly in direct opposition to such a step on my part. I have no friends to help me. I am alone, and I am a woman, and I am not strong enough to fight it out. If my brother were here, I should never give up—never—to the arrogance that would deny me my right; but he is gone, and so what is the use? Like him, I am very tired and it is not worth while.

In a few days at most I hope to be able to

THE HOMESTEADERS

give you instructions as to the disposal of my stock. My uncle joins me in thanking you for your kindness to us.

Very sincerely yours,

JOSEPHINE CARROLL.

Cold, too, this letter of Josephine's, and still doubtful of him; but was she so much to blame? As she had said, "I cannot see the light." Ah, well, what she thought could make no difference as to his part in life henceforth. That part was to bring under the noose of the law Jack's murderer, who was still, as Josephine had said, at large. This thing he would do if it took him until his life's end; for Jack's sake, for Josephine's sake, for his own sake, for the honor of the cattle country. So he threw up the head that the coldness of Josephine's letter had bowed in sadness and rode on.

He had dwelt incessantly ever since it had been discovered that Frank LaDue was not at home on the island, and, furthermore, that painstaking search had failed to disclose his present whereabouts, upon that chance remark of Henry Hoffman's, that Frank LaDue had boasted of a "stand-in" with Sheriff Dennison, and he won-

THE END OF THE CHASE

dered if it could be true. The thought had chafed him unutterably.

There was a new man at the ferry. The boat had been found several days after the tragedy some distance below Ole Johnson's place, drawn up securely into the slack water of an indentation that cut into the sandy drift below the chalk-rock bluffs. With what object in view the owner of it had made so unusual a landing, one that smacked so strongly of a desire for concealment, was not easy of divination, especially when one took into consideration the idea conveyed by Henry Hoffman's assertion that LaDue rather courted publicity than otherwise for his movements immediately antedating and during the night of the shocking tragedy. But the boat was there, and however awkward and inadequate its service, there was an urgent need of it on the old trail, and the patrons of the road were agreed that it must be returned to its accustomed quarters. It was a ticklish undertaking thus to tamper with the effects of a vindictive outlaw, but there was no hesitation and but little precaution in the performance of it. As Ole Johnson said with a fine unconcern:

THE HOMESTEADERS

"Let him shoot and be damned, the skunk, and we'll ferret him out by the smell of his powder," and the rest had ratified the defiance with hearty unanimity.

So the boat was rowed laboriously back against the high-water current and lodged again at its old moorings, where another surprise awaited the neighbors, who had thought they knew the big, fair, reticent, self-centred Norseman, for he volunteered good-naturedly to be within hail on certain days of the week to assist the crossing of the ranchmen who lived on the other side. He was waiting for Burrington now, leaning contentedly against the bank and chewing tobacco with a serene indifference to any possible danger that might be lurking for him anywhere about because of his cavalier handling of another man's goods.

"Nothing doing, I suppose, Ole?" asked Tom, lightly, as he mounted his horse after their slow and wearisome crossing.

"There is nothing doing, no," acquiesced the Norseman.

"Nevertheless, Ole, I think you had better keep a pretty sharp lookout," advised Burrington, seriously. "He has an ugly disposition and

THE END OF THE CHASE

would doubtless find a real sport in potting both you and that tub full of holes in mid-stream if the notion struck him."

"You think he is about this place?" inquired Ole, with phlegmatic unconcern, as he prepared to make himself comfortable under a shady elm. The water had long since crept up to the timber line so that he had not far to go.

"Who knows?" said Tom, gloomily. "Where is he then? Are n't you going back to-night, Ole? It is late."

"I'll wait a bit. Them Injuns are somewhere on the island—Bear Heart and that half-breed girl of Two Hawks. They seem to be hanging round most of the time. The girl told me to wait a little while."

"Funny," thought Tom. "I wonder why Rosebud is going back to-night."

The sun was very low when Tom rode slowly past the little log house whimsically called the Broken Key. The day had been insufferably hot. Even yet the heat radiated in warm waves from the generous earth which would continue to give of its fulness long after the sun had gone down. But it was not like the glare of the zenith-riding sun of mid-day. Tom took off his heavy hat to

THE HOMESTEADERS

cool his moist, red-creased forehead and flicked it thoughtfully back and forth before his heated face. How deserted it all looked! Deserted and forlorn! The weeds had grown so rankly around the woodpile in the three weeks as almost to hide its weather-stained grayness and lonesome look of disuse, and the path leading to it was well-nigh obliterated by the crowding phalanx. The encroachment unexpectedly stopped short at the rude lattice where Josephine had planted her sweet peas and which, instead of having been choked out of existence, had already begun to blossom. Tom did not wonder how the flowers received water and attention. He took their presence altogether for granted in the masculine way that evinces no curiosity until the wonted has been suddenly blotted from his vision; but he did wish that Josephine might have been there to see this fructification of her undismayed effort on the untried soil. And then upon his brooding spirit fell a strange, new depression fraught with vague forebodings of evil to come and a man's grief for the empty house that had sheltered for a little while within its rough exterior a bit of fair life now passed from it forever. The blinds were drawn at the closed windows, shutting out

THE END OF THE CHASE

the heartless day from view of the dead ashes of the hearthstone. Nothing could ever make it the same any more. There was no sign of life anywhere while the evening deepened and the windows shone with a ghostly reflection as the sun sank at last behind the hills, and when Tom rode away from the reverie-haunted melancholy that must abide there forever, his eyes were wet because of many things, but principally because of the inevitable sadness of the brief play of the Broken Key, played too soon and ended so irrevocably.

About a mile beyond, he met Rosebud. The girl arose spectrally from a clump of plum trees bordering a ravine by the roadside and advanced to meet him.

"You are to go back at once," she said, abruptly. She carried a gun and looked brave and determined.

"Why?" asked Tom, in astonishment.

"You are not to ask why. Won't you take my word for it and go back to Velpen at once?" she asked, hurriedly. "You can trust Onjijitka."

"I have n't a doubt in the world as to that, Rosebud," said Tom, heartily, "but you might as well understand right now that I shall not stir

THE HOMESTEADERS

one step until you have satisfied my curiosity."

"Ole Johnson is still at the landing," she pleaded. "I told him to wait. He thinks I am going back, but I was thinking of you when I told him to wait. If you hurry, you will find him there, and he will take you across."

"Come, Rosebud, tell me what it is all about," demanded Tom, peremptorily. "You have news of LaDue, have you not? For God's sake, don't waste time. What is it?"

"If you would only go — for Josephine's sake," insisted Rosebud, forlornly, knowing that she was beaten, but clinging desperately to her overwhelming desire that he should turn back.

"I can better stay — for Josephine's sake," said Tom, gravely, as he dismounted. "If you convince me that I do right to retrace my steps, why, I will surely do so. Is n't that fair, Rosebud? I shall not stir until I know what it is all about."

"You — you — men are all so stubborn," said Rosebud, with angry scorn. "You will never listen to reason. It is the same way with Bear Heart. He could have given LaDue up more times than once, but no — he must be forever trailing him to find out about the Indian cattle

THE END OF THE CHASE

he stole. He says he will kill him himself when he finds out about them. Foolish Bear Heart! What does that matter since those calves are scattered all over the world by this time and he never will get them back? But Two Hawks is getting old, and he listens to the young Bear Heart, and so what can Onjijitka do?"

"You can tell me, Rosebud," prompted Tom, with gleaming eyes. He had struck the long-sought trail at last.

"Tom," she began, her present impetuosity in striking contrast to her former air of reluctance, "Bear Heart heard Frank LaDue boast last night that he was going to waylay you to-day on the road from Velpen. He said that you were the cause of all his trouble, and that if it were not for you Dennison would not dream of arresting him. He said that it was none of your business, and that he intended to put a plaster over your mouth this very day, to pay you for your interference. So I am here to tell you and to beg you to go back before it is too late. He was to go to the island between seven and eight o'clock and to wait for you there, but you are earlier than he planned for. He will be coming along soon now. Do go! How can you hesitate?"

THE HOMESTEADERS

"Rosebud," asked Tom, irrelevantly, "where did Bear Heart see LaDue?"

"That is Bear Heart's secret," said Rosebud, steadily. "But I have his permission to tell you that he has at last found the dugout, and that your horses are still there and have been well cared for. So you see LaDue still has friends, even though you have sent three of the gang to the penitentiary. I am also to tell you that Bear Heart will drive your horses home to-night. What you have asked is, as I have said, Bear Heart's secret."

"Maybe you are right," said Tom, with intense disappointment, and giving little heed to the news of the discovered dugout. He had long thought that Frank LaDue was only a common horse thief and cattle rustler, and the absolute proof of it interested him but little now. His mind was bent on something graver than thieving. So had it been bent when he rode to West-over, outwardly seeking his own stolen property—in reality trailing the man who, he believed, meant no good to Josephine Carroll. "I am afraid, though, that it looks bad for Bear Heart. Tell him that it looks mightily like complicity to me and will look so to others, and that it might

THE END OF THE CHASE

go hard with him if his unlawful knowledge is found out on him. I should be sorry. I always thought he was a good Indian."

Up went the girl's proud head and her dark eyes flashed defiance. "Bear Heart is a true son of the Dakotahs," she said, haughtily. "It is only when we marry with the white men that our young men steal."

It was a scathing rebuke, and it went home, for with his fair mind and unprejudiced judgment, Tom knew that much of what she said was true.

"Forgive me, Rosebud," he said, simply. "I was wrong."

He vaulted into his saddle.

"You are going back?" she implored, hopefully.

"No," said Tom, with great deliberation, "I am going forward to meet my friend LaDue."

"I hoped," said Rosebud, despairingly, "that he would pass first. I was ready for him. I was going to kill him. He is a desperate man. He is also a coward. He will not meet you in the road like a man. He will lie in hiding by the way and shoot you in the back. I had to plan that way—to hide in ambush—but that is because I am a

THE HOMESTEADERS

girl and a Dakotah, and he is a big strong man and would kill me as he would a snake before I could even know what he was about. So I hid. And he will hide. Tom, you must listen to me!" she cried, passionately.

"Why, my girl," said Tom, laughingly, "what would Bear Heart think if he knew that you were planning cold-bloodedly to put out of existence this man whom he considers his own just prey? Did you really mean to do it? Bear Heart will never forgive you, notwithstanding that his heart is set upon you."

"I could not help that." There was much dignity in the simple rejoinder.

"But we are wasting too much time," exclaimed Tom, suddenly. "It is getting late. You must go home, Rosebud. I have taken command of this affair, and I bid you go home, and go at once. I shall ride on and meet our man—provided his words were not a vain boast, as I am much inclined to believe they were. You need not be afraid that he will waylay me. He has too much to answer for already. Besides, he does not dare to touch Tom Burrington of the Seven-up."

He smiled, deprecating his own self-esteem.

THE END OF THE CHASE

"Promise me that you will go home, Rosebud," he said.

"I will go," she said, soberly.

He started forward, but came back before he had gone far.

"You said you would go home, did n't you?" he asked, doubtfully.

"I said I would go," she responded, enigmatically.

He started again, stopped, and turned around in his saddle.

"I have your promise?" he called, confidently.

"Yes," she said, and he rode away.

Rosebud stood still in the road and watched him as he cantered up a little knoll and disappeared behind its yonder slope. Then she smiled—a ghost of a vanishing smile.

"He killed Jack," she said to herself, whisperingly, and with the rifle held firmly in her arms, she returned to the roadside, slipped down into her old position among the plum trees and resumed her vigil.

Tom had gone but a short distance when, turning a sharp bend where the trail swerved in order to take advantage of a capacious "draw," he was suddenly confronted by the outlaw, Frank

THE HOMESTEADERS

LaDue, with a revolver handily in play, who seemed to have been awaiting his nearer approach.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Frank?" said Tom, pleasantly.

"You are right there, pard, it's me," said LaDue, significantly.

"You have been causing your friends some uneasiness by your long-continued absence," said Tom, smilingly, but with a watchful eye.

"Specially you, I presume?" asked LaDue, with an impious grin.

"Especially me," acquiesced Tom, imperturbably.

"Well, here I am," boasted LaDue, grandiloquently. "Now, what are you goin' to do about it? You don't seem to be makin' no great shakes o' palaverin' over the prodigal—weepin' on my neck and killin' the fatted calf. Maybe I'm dull, but I sure don't read the signs that way."

"If I had read—some signs as easily as you read these, Frank, one who is gone might even now be here in my place before you to teach a dastardly coward how to fight fair." Tom's voice vibrated with passionate scorn.

"Look a-here, Tom Burrington, I don't stand for no more callin' names. D'ye understand?

THE END OF THE CHASE

You 've trailed me long enough and I 've turned. This ain't been none o' your business from the start, but you insisted on gettin' into the roundup without permit, so now you 'll have to stand for your share of the shift. Nobody asked for your interference, damn you, Burrington! What is it to you—what has it ever been to you, I 'd like to know—a private quarrel I had with my own enemy? Do you think you 're God A'mighty that you must have a hand in workin' over the ethics o' this here cattle country? Well, you ain't. If it had n't been for you and your everlastin' bigotry, I would n't be sneakin' round the outer edges o' civilization now and eatin' snakes and toads, for all it 'd matter to you. Fortunately my diet does n't depend upon you or your movements. I have a friend or two yet who 'll stick to me long after the coyotes are pickin' your bones—for I am goin' to kill you, Tom Burrington, I 'm goin' to shoot you just as I 'd shoot a pesky rattler that disputed my right o' way. No, don't move your hand that way, damn you, Tom. You ain't got no more use for a gun than a poor little homesick doggie has. Yes, I killed Carroll, I ain't any call to lie about it — 'specially to you. I 'm glad I killed him. I 'd do it again

THE HOMESTEADERS

if I could. I only wish I'd done it sooner. I wish I'd killed him the night o' the blizzard like I started out to do. You'd found him with a bullet through his head if I'd only been sure o' finding him in the storm. And I wish you'd a' been killed outright when your saddle broke at the ropin'. I only planned your defeat because you were gettin' a little too high-headed for your own good, so to speak, and thought you were big enough to carry those land-grabbers on your own shoulders; but it'd a' saved a heap o' trouble since if you'd never got your breath again. You've been so smart ever since that you thought you could overturn and reconstruct the whole moral plan o' the cow lands. But you can't. It's a bigger proposition than tyin' a steer with the women lookin' on and clappin' their fool hands. This ain't a woman's country, my friend. You've got to go it alone. I have only one regret. As I said, this ain't no woman's country. If I'd only killed that miserable girl before she got away, I would n't ask for anything more. I tried to—it ain't my fault that I did n't—hell!"

This exclamation was called forth by Tom's unexpected move. Maddened to desperation by this last, this venomous attack upon Josephine,



“The young ranchman dealt death fairly and truly to the slayer
of his friend”

THE END OF THE CHASE

he had suddenly dodged down behind his horse's head and slipped from the saddle, dragging his revolver from its holster during his sliding transit to the ground. Almost simultaneously with his violent outcry, LaDue fired, but he was disconcerted by the unexpectedness of Tom's action and missed. Before he could fire a second time, Tom's arm shot out in front of his horse, and the young ranchman dealt death fairly and truly to the slayer of his friend so that he fell from his saddle without a word and lay in a still bunch upon the road, his boots trailing in the dust of the vanishing cattle trails.

"It had to be," whispered Tom, his face set in lines of great and stern sadness. "It was his life or mine."

"It is well," said a soft, even voice at his elbow. "I should have done it, but it is well. I told you that he had murder in his heart."

"Rosebud! I thought you had gone home!"

"I am going now," she said, and glided away straight into the heart of the trackless and darkening wilderness.

CHAPTER XXI

THE HOMESTEADER

THERE were two things in the letter Rosebud wrote soon after this that arrested Josephine's aimless drifting along in the present and called her back from her unprofitable dwelling in retrospection. The first thing of moment was this:

“And now that Frank LaDue is dead, Henry Hoffman safe for probably a twenty years' imprisonment, and the island no longer a runway for stolen cattle, thanks to Bear Heart and his band of young men who have brought many dark transactions to light and have made it impossible that any future unlawful proceedings find a friendly cover there, there is peace along the river, and decent people can walk out in daylight once more without being in dread of what may be lurking behind every tree in the valley that surrounds them or every turn in the road that lies before them. Ruffianism is dead in Kemah, Josephine. It died with the arch-fiend, Frank LaDue.”

THE HOMESTEADER

This word from Rosebud caused all fear for her own life, should she ever again listen to the lure of the West, to fall away from her, and the lifting of the blanket horror was an unspeakable relief to her, even though she might never return to take advantage of the freer air that would grant her life without hampering and dread conditions. It was a good word. Rosebud went on:

“He made a cloak, Josephine, of the unfriendly feeling in the cattle lands toward homesteading, entertained by the stock-raisers in general, and which even amounted to bitter animosity in some quarters, but he was not in league with them at all. They would not stoop to make a tool of such a brutal and treacherous villain as Frank LaDue; but he assumed the cloak of their resentment to hide his baser designs in running you out of the country, and I think he trusted too much in the strength of this resentment, Josephine. I think that he thought it was so great and so bitter as to condone his fault and to win for him exemption from prosecution, even if his guilt was discovered; especially, since he had relieved them of all trouble and had spared them blood-guiltiness. But he miscalculated and was led far astray. There was even talk of lynch law, Jo-

THE HOMESTEADERS

sephine. The stockmen had absolutely nothing to do with Jack's murder."

But it was what followed in Rosebud's letter that roused her fighting Southern spirit from its lethargy and sent her to repacking her trunks in the old purposeful way:

"It is true, however, that they were opposed to your settling west of the river. By what right were they so insolently opposed? But they were and are. Yet it is a free country, and there is room for all. They make of themselves an allied band for present gain and selfish personal aggrandizement and rule by force and arrogance. It is as lawless in principle as when lesser men band together to steal horses or cattle. If you will come back, Josephine, I will gladly come to you as I promised, and we, you and I, just two girls, will fight it out together. Your land is too fair to loose, too rich in promise, and to stay away—that is just what they want you to do, with the exception, perhaps, of Tom Burrington of the Seven-up. We will force these insolent men to acknowledge the justness of our position and wrest our right from the greed that would withhold it."

The Indian girl had touched the right chord.

THE HOMESTEADER

Gone forever were the dreamy dwelling in the past, the indecision of the present, and the shrinking dread of the future. It was living again to feel the blood of a fighting ancestry pounding through her veins once more. Jack had died for a principle. He had vindicated it with his blood. Should it count for naught? Should she let the land for which he had given his life slip away from her control because she, the last of the Carrolls, lacked the courage and resolution, the high faith and lofty pride to uphold the standard of right against might which had fallen from Jack's hands only when he had bought its immortality with his life's blood? Must the red-stained banner be let to trail in the dust of cowardice and inaction for want of a consecrated standard-bearer, or left for others to bear it again into the heart of the contemptuous and overbearing cattle lands? No, no! Not when it was Jack who had been the sacrifice. She could and would rise to the greatness of the trust. She not only should keep his land from slipping back into the general description of unoccupied government lands and thereby hold it beyond the reach of hovering land hawks, but she should also snatch her own claim from their talons. These two things she should

THE HOMESTEADERS

do if her own life paid the price. She hated herself for her former shrinking, cowardly inaction, and indecision. In August, the six months of grace given her before she must go to live upon her own claim would be expired. It was high time she was about the business of having her house built and preparations under way for the care and comfort during the long siege of the coming Winter of her stock, of herself, and of Rosebud. So she wrote to Rosebud without the loss of a day and asked her to open the Broken Key and to meet her at Velpen upon a certain day in August with Long Chase. She also wrote a brief note to Tom Burrington, thanking him again for his kindly forethought and care, and asking him to return the Broken Key stock by a certain day in August, on which date Rosebud would take up her residence at the Broken Key in readiness for her, Josephine's return. These two letters written and despatched, Josephine went quietly about the task of packing her trunks for her second flitting.

It was on a cool, sunny, bracing day in early August that Ole Johnson, with neighborly accommodation and with infinite patience and labor, crossed the river with his wagon and heavy team

THE HOMESTEADER

to move the household effects from the log cabin of the Broken Key to the tiny frame shanty that had suddenly sprung into existence on the quarter north. The loaded wagon was creaking and swaying along the level grassy way at the foot of the hills, with the big blonde Norwegian trudging by the side, when Louis Burrington, on horseback, cantered up to the door of the dismantled cabin and emitted a "Hello, the house!" with much strength of youthful lungs and a resultant joyous shrillness of intonation. It was not his first visit by any means, not understanding, and therefore wisely not accepting, the new status of strained civility between the once so familiar houses of the Seven-up and the Broken Key.

Josephine came to the door with a broom in her hand and with her pretty hair tucked into a dust cap.

"We are too busy for a social chat, chum," she said, smiling a welcome, "but 'light and come in and oversee this tremendous affair of moving, won't you? By and by, you may saddle and bridle Long Chase for me and escort Rosebud and me to our new domicile, and I will make you a cup of tea and you will be the first guest

THE HOMESTEADERS

to receive hospitality dispensed from the new abode. Will you like that?"

"Good for you, Josephine," cried the boy, jumping from his horse and accepting her further invitation with alacrity. He followed her to the house and would have sat down upon the door step but, bethinking himself, flushed hotly and choked up, while tears swam in his blue eyes. He sat down on an empty box, hurriedly. Josephine, too, shuddered a little, but she said very gently:

"Never mind, honey, we won't think of it any more, you and I. Tell me, what have you been doing since I saw you last?"

Rosebud, who would not leave Josephine alone on this last day, now took advantage of the boy's presence to strike across the country on the trail of the slowly moving wagon, so that she might be on hand to help with the unloading and perhaps be in time to give the house a little home touch here and there before Josephine came. Two Hawks had put forth no objection to his step-daughter's change of residence. He was fond of her in his lazy, uninitiative way, but she tried him sorely because of her pride and her strange unrest. He was therefore frankly re-

THE HOMESTEADER

lieved and enjoyed to the uttermost the respite from the discontent and the unflagging persuasions to a cleaner, more ambitious life with which, in truth, he had been beset since the day he had married the mother of this strange, dreamy, passionate creature; but if she had troubled his easy and phlegmatic nature in those earlier days, he counted it as of little worth as compared with the later time when these young and untried gentlefolks had come out of the South to let loose the devil of reform in his tepee. So Two Hawks was weakly glad. As for Bear Heart, Bear Heart of the unconquerable soul, his man hunt ended, he went back to the wide plains, drew his blanket about him, and bided his time.

"It would have been a lot easier for you to have gotten a wagon from the Seven-up than for Ole Johnson to have to cross his on that clumsy boat," said Louis, judicially.

"You are right," replied Josephine, laying aside her dust cap and ruffling up her bright hair with her hands.

"Why did n't you?" demanded Louis, discontentedly.

"Oh, because Mr. Johnson is my nearest neighbor and he was good enough to offer his services,"

THE HOMESTEADERS

explained Josephine, tranquilly. "Had n't you better go for my horse now?"

But Louis did not know that he was treading upon dangerous ground and blurted out in surprise:

"Why, you are not half ready, Josephine! You can't ride in those calico duds, you know. I'll have Long Chase here in a jiffy when you are ready to lock up. Tom'd have offered his services quick enough, too, only I think—mind, it's only a think, Josephine—but I think that Tom thinks you're mad at him. He never said anything," continued the boy, loyally, "I just think. Gee! If our friend Ole had had to depend on the boat Tom had when he went after Ole's fast horse, I guess he would n't be so flush scattering favors around so free and easy," he ended, grumblingly.

"What boat are you talking about?" demanded Josephine, stopping short on her way to change the "calico duds" to which the boy had put forth such lofty objection. "What kind of a boat did your brother use?"

"A leaky old tub so full of holes that it sank when Tom got to the middle of the river," explained Louis, with unction.

THE HOMESTEADER

“What did he do then?”

“Swam, of course. Did n’t Rosebud tell you about it? Come to think of it, though, I guess she did n’t know, herself, what a time Tom had. She helped him find the boat, but she’d gone back when Tom’s troubles began. Gee! Tom’s a strong swimmer! I’ll bet anybody but him’d have drowned two or three times over before he got across. But, gee! That was easy compared with what came after!”

“Well, what did come after?” demanded Josephine, with some impatience.

“Why, the current was so strong, he just drifted and drifted down the river, and when he finally did manage to get across—what do you suppose?” He paused, impressively. “Well, sir, he had gone past the Gap, and there was n’t any place to crawl out at, ’cause there were just bare bluffs that stuck right down into the water. Now what do you think of that? So he just let himself float along till he came to Ole’s. But he scratched his hands all up till they bled a lot — trying to get out, I guess. Gee! He was a sight when he came after mother.”

“That is why he was barefoot, I suppose,” she said, musingly. “I wondered about it afterward.”

THE HOMESTEADERS

"You see, he said he kicked off his shoes before ever he got into the boat 'cause he knew he'd have to swim for it sooner or later. I wish I was as brave as Tom," he added, ingenuously.

"I think that it was very foolhardy of him to take such a serious risk, knowing as he did, that his boat was absolutely untrustworthy," said Josephine, gravely.

"Well, it was for you, you know," argued Louis. "I can't much blame him, I must say. A fellow'd be a chump who would n't do a lot more than that for you, Josephine," he said, affectionately.

"Thank you, dear boy," said Josephine, quietly, and slipped into the inner room. Was the whole world in a conspiracy to force her to believe that Tom had been true? First there was Rosebud, drawing a strict line, and unwaveringly adhering to it, between the desire of the stock-raisers and the deed of the ruffian, LaDue. If it was true that Jack's murder had been without the consent, the knowledge, or even the acquiescence of the cattlemen, then had she indeed misjudged her brother's friend, and the attitude of accuser that she had assumed toward him could have no justification in what had seemed like

THE HOMESTEADER

the working out of the will of the master mind by the hand of an inferior. If, as Rosebud believed, LaDue had not even the excuse of doing as he had done with the fanatical idea that he was acting with the tacit consent of the ranchmen, but had made use of their disaffection as a cloak to hide his own infamy, hoping then to curry favor with which to ward off prosecution, then, indeed, how could her brother's friend have foreseen the terrible tragedy? There was Rosebud, too, with a few telling words, making the inestimable part Tom had played in obtaining Henry's confession and his incomparable heroism in going forth to meet and arrest, alone, a desperate outlaw at bay, afterwards slain in self-defence, stand out in the light of their real greatness. And now here was Louis, in his innocent prattle, telling of yet other great things that had been done for her by a cattleman, for her who was a homesteader. Had her quick woman's suspicion been ignoble, after all? When, dressed for riding, she returned to the boy, she asked straightforwardly:

"Why did not Mr. Burrington tell me about these things, Louis?"

"Men don't brag, Josephine," replied Louis, airily. "Just the same," he added, plaintively,

THE HOMESTEADERS

"I do wish I had n't promised not to tell you about the gulch. My telling would n't so much matter. I'm not a man — yet. But Tom's so squeamish about some things. However, I promised, and so you need n't ask me to tell because I am not going to. Are you all ready, Josephine?"

It was late Fall before she saw Tom Burrington. He came riding over to the new homestead one still day in November when the haze of Indian Summer rested lightly and dreamily over the gaunt outlines of stripped wood and hill and plain.

"I could n't bear it any longer," he told her, gravely, as his big figure crossed the threshold of the tiny house where she and Rosebud were so intrepidly working out the details of their resolution. Unlike the cabin of the Broken Key, this house was built away from the timbered district, up on the grass lands just under the hills, and commanded a far outlook down the valley. Josephine had a dread of the woods of late, and so had builded in the open.

"Rosebud is out with the cattle," said Josephine, nervously. "She will be sorry to miss you."

"I did not come to see Rosebud. I came to

THE HOMESTEADER

see you, Josephine," said Tom, unequivocally. He would not sit down, but stood straight and determined before her.

"Before you say anything," began Josephine, earnestly, "I want to ask you something. You must tell me the truth this time, Mr. Burrington. Nothing but the truth will count now. You did not shoot at a wolf that time—in the gulch. Tell me, what did you shoot at?" She lifted her great, serious, brown eyes to him, questioningly.

"I shot at a man, Josephine," he responded, simply.

Josephine began to tremble violently, uncontrollably. She had grown very pale. She had been trying hard to prepare herself for this revelation ever since Louis' innocent half-betrayal on that day when he had ridden over to help her and Rosebud move; but this indisputable proving of the brutal truth found and left her for the moment completely unnerved. She had been so light-hearted that evening riding down into the gulch. And now to think what had lurked for her in that shadowed little washout up on the western wall! She had been so unconscious of any hostile presence, and now to think what might have been! She shivered again and again.

THE HOMESTEADERS

"Who was the man?" she asked, tremulously.

"Henry Hoffman."

"Did you know him?"

"Not then. I found out for sure afterwards. Who told you, Josephine?"

"Never mind that now. No one told me. I have been thinking, that is all. And you think he was going to kill me?" she asked with an effort, though she was fast regaining self-control.

"I thought so—yes. He told me afterwards, in his confession, that he never could have done it. Sometimes, I believe that he spoke the truth, Josephine, and that he never could have done it."

"Did Jack know?"

"Yes, I told him. He did not believe it."

"Then you did not keep anything back from my brother—he knew everything?"

"I think he knew everything that I knew."

"And yet he stayed?"

"And yet he stayed."

"I wish you had told me, Mr. Burrington," said Josephine, wistfully. "If you had told me, Jack might be here to-day."

"It was so horrible, Josephine," he said, "and we could not be sure. It was Jack's wish as well as mine that you be not told."

THE HOMESTEADER

Never again was this subject of what might have been mentioned between these two. Many things might have been different had they foreseen or had they had a better understanding then of some signs that were so easy to read—afterwards; but they had not foreseen and they had not understood, so they tried to forget.

She held out her hand.

“Will you forgive me?” she asked, simply. “I was altogether wrong. Let us be friends again.”

“Why, Josephine,” he stammered, his face flushing, suddenly, “why, Josephine, I—I—forgive you? Why, I love you. Didn’t you know that? I came to tell you. Look at me, dear, and tell me that you love me and that you will come to me. Do, dear.”

She did look up, all her heart in her honest eyes.

“I do love you, Tom, but—” she began, when Tom kissed her and the pressure of his lips upon hers silenced what she would have said further. His pulses were leaping, his eyes shone.

“You must leave this lonely shack at once—to-morrow—or next day—next week at the very latest,” he whispered, holding her close, “and come to the Seven-up with me. We are all ready

THE HOMESTEADERS

for you there — oh, Josephine, Josephine, I love you so!”

“You must let me finish what I started to tell you a moment ago,” said Josephine, resolutely.

“Very well,” said Tom, releasing her and folding his arms as if that were the only way he could trust himself to keep them to himself. “Proceed. What were you going to say when I interrupted you so rudely?”

“Jack,” she continued, steadily, “had set his heart on our possessing this tract of bottom land on the river. I shall not disappoint him. We dreamed many dreams together, Jack and I. He did his share toward bringing about their fulfilment. I have mine yet to do. A little while ago, I shrank from my part. It is different now. I shall live on my land as Jack lived on his until it is mine. I shall have earned it twice over, I think. I think that no one can find fault with me and call me a land-grabber when I — bring it to you. We paid for it with blood. Let no one think to cheat me out of what has been so dearly bought.”

“No one would wish to do that, Josephine. The stock-raisers are horror-stricken over —

THE HOMESTEADERS

what happened. We have done some grumbling, it is true, in regard to homesteaders in general, for settlement means that we can no longer let our large herds roam where they will; it means that we will no longer have thousands of acres of free pasture; it means that we will have to give up the vocation that we love so well. But however much the stock-raisers have disliked to see the homesteaders come into the country, they have never thought of taking arbitrary means to keep them out. The feeling against homesteaders that exists in the cattle country had nothing to do with what happened. No one would wish to deprive you of your homestead, Josephine, but you cannot live here alone. You must marry me now. Let the old claim go. You have Jack's — that is enough. No, Josephine, I cannot consent to your staying here alone," he said, with a new ring of authority in his voice.

"I am not alone," she answered, with unchanging purpose, "and Rosebud is faithful."

"At least you will commute in eight months?" he urged, realizing the utter futility of further effort to turn her from her inflexible purpose.

"Let us not cross the bridge until we get to it," she said, demurely, with which unsatisfactory

THE HOMESTEADERS

statement he was forced to be content for the time being.

"Just two girls alone," protested Tom, returning to his original plaint, unreconciled. "I cannot bear to think of it."

"You will come to see us sometimes, won't you, Tom?" she asked smiling.

THE END



The Homesteaders



KATE and VIRGIL D. BOYLES